

# THE BROTHERS OF THE COMMON LIFE

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John Grinnell Harrell



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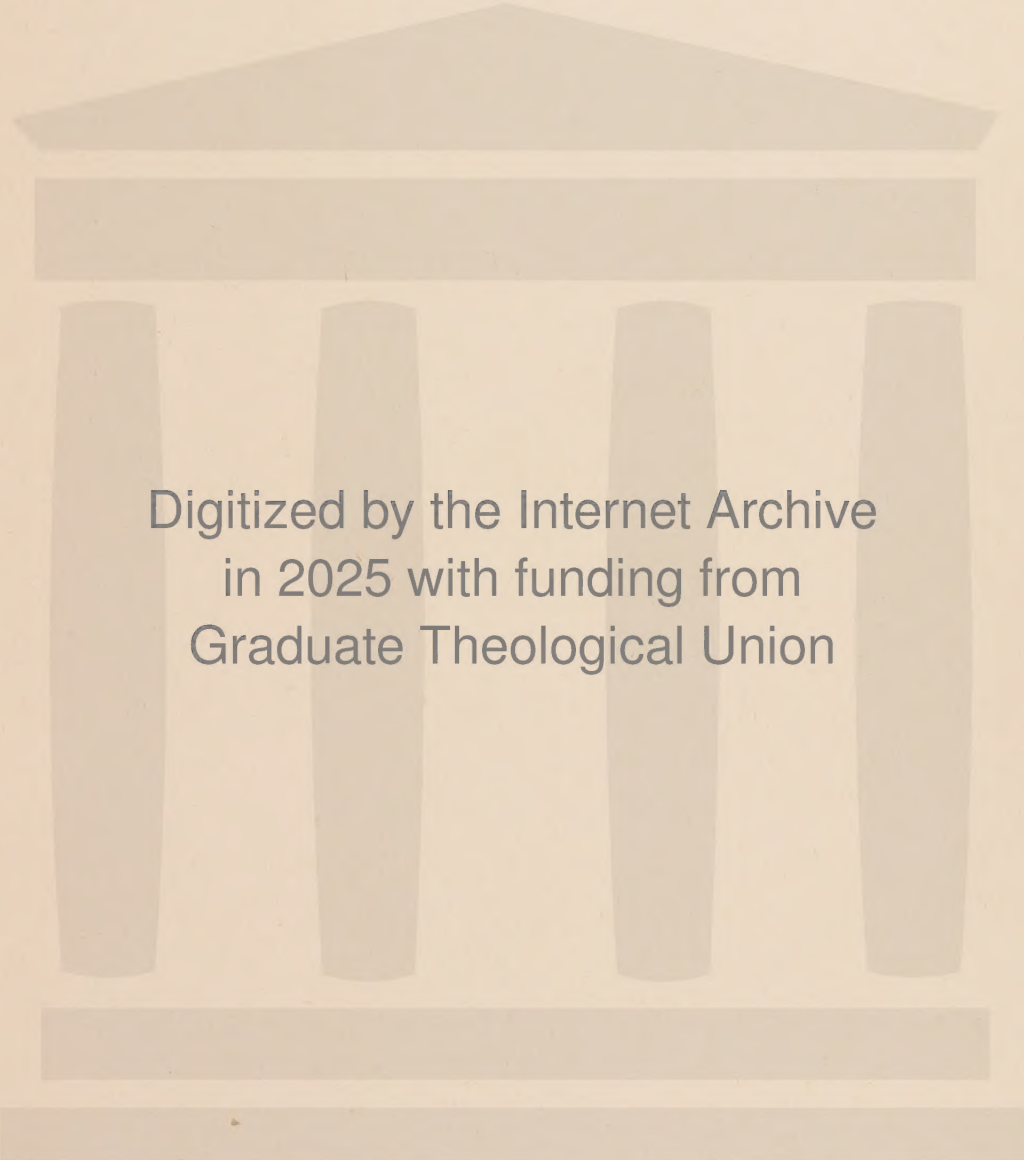
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ERRATA

- pg. 1, line 6, for '"summa's"' read '"summa"'.  
pg. 8, line 13, for 'Augustian' read 'Augustinian'.  
pg. 51, line 11, for 'instruction' read 'instructed'.  
pg. 61, line 6, add '"Scarce have I known"' to '"of any place..."'.  
pg. 79, line 6, for 'Holy supper' read 'Holy Supper'.  
pg. 101, line 14, for 'essentials' read 'essential'.

DEPARTMENT OF DIVINITY

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June, 1947



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THE BROTHERS OF THE COMMON LIFE

An Historical Account of Their Origin, Growth, and  
Decline, and an Evaluation in Relation to the  
Renaissance and Reformation

By

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A.B., Occidental College, 1944

A THESIS

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## PREFACE

Any individual or group of individuals who stood in a "half-way-house" at the time of the Reformation was bound to be misunderstood at the time, and misrepresented for a period following that cataclysmic event in Christianity. Seemingly uncontrollable elements of pride, emotion, and prejudice have hampered a true enlightened evaluation of the Brothers, who indeed stood in the "half-way-house." It is the purpose of this monograph to attempt a re-evaluation of their labors in the historical framework of the waning Middle Ages and the advent of the Renaissance and the Reformation; to form a judgment as to which tradition, if any, stems from their influence; and to determine to what extent they were committed to the monastic ideal.

The available English sources for such a study are surprisingly inadequate. On the whole, they fall into three groups: Roman Catholic authors who carry biases peculiar to themselves or their Church; a Lutheran author who finds in the Brothers a precursory confirmation of Luther's reforming actions; and lastly, a philosopher who betrays the Humanistic ideal, tempered characteristically by Calvinism. (The philosopher's concept of Christianity is too frequently Augustinian-Calvinistic--perhaps because this tradition lies within the





freer realm of Protestantism, yet is "neat" enough to please the orderly minds of those "lovers of wisdom.") There is also one last author to be mentioned, for he is typical of the sentimentalist in a field generally open to conjecture. Conjecture in such instances needs to be scholarly—hardly the place for the sentimentalist.

In this same vein, the present writer's use of quotations from the blessed Thomas à Kempis may be questioned. Much of the spirit of the Brothers is to be gained from the accounts of Thomas—a spirit essential to the Brothers, and essential to any knowledge of them. It is for this reason that he is here frequently quoted.

It is hoped that we have here a proper evaluation of those good Brothers who were so devoted to our Lord and to His Truth. Perhaps, we suggest, they were the precursors of no single tradition. They were men who were nurtured within the Roman Church and hoped to find there all that was True. The Truth, however, required to submit to restriction, refused Holy Obedience, while the Brothers on the whole accepted it. Therein died the spirit of the Christian Renaissance which belonged neither within that fold nor without—but indeed belongs to that greater fold tended by the only Pastor-Bonus.

J. G. H.

Berkeley, California

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
SECTION	
I. The End of an Era.....	1
II. Scholasticism, Mysticism, and Heresy.....	11
III. "Thou oughtest to become another man".....	19
IV. The Brothers of the Common Life.....	34
V. The Canons Regular of St. Augustine.....	57
VI. The New Devotion.....	68
VII. Gansfort, Luther, Erasmus, and Loyola.....	88
VIII. "Undique et ubique".....	96
IX. "Me submitto".....	101
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	106





## I

True, the glorious thirteenth century had been an achievement of unity, high aspirations, and faith. If liberty as we think of it today was lost, it was found in "perfect obedience to perfect law,"<sup>1</sup> and that law was perfectly known. There was little need for inquiry; what was known had only to be united in one of the many summa's of the times. Whatever the medieval mind had envisioned, it was realized during the reign of Innocent III, Dominus Dominantium. And though the civitas Dei had always struggled with the civitas terrena, at last it reigned supreme.

The "glories" of the thirteenth century, however, were not to last for a long period. Pope Clement V. elected as a compromise by the college of cardinals after ten months of bitter contention among themselves, took up his residence at Avignon. The next seventy years of the "Babylonish Captivity"<sup>2</sup> saw the papal retinue turn suddenly French, and join the French opposition to the German empire. It became obvious by the uprising within Italy that the pope must return if he were

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<sup>1</sup> John Herman Randall, Jr., The Making of the Modern Mind (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1926), p. 79.

<sup>2</sup> So called by Petrarch. James Westfall Thompson and Edgar Nathaniel Johnson, An Introduction to Medieval Europe (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1937), p. 969.





to maintain permanently his secular authority. Urban V was persuaded to return by Charles IV, Emperor of the Roman Empire, whose interest was for a Roman papacy rather than for a French one which interfered in the affairs of Germany. Urban V found Rome uncomfortable, as did his successor Gregory XI, who likewise quit Avignon for the Eternal City. Upon the latter's death, the Vatican was stormed by mobs demanding a Roman pontiff. The cardinals, the majority of whom were French, decided upon a Neapolitan who took the name of Urban VI. Urban proved to be unsatisfactory<sup>3</sup> to the cardinals, who had hoped for a pliable pawn. Therefore they reassembled in Anagni where they invalidated Urban's election on the grounds of mob intimidation, and elected the militant antipope, Clement VII, who eventually took up residence in Avignon. There followed from 1378 a schism for forty years during which there were two successions of popes, papal courts, and colleges of cardinals.

Western Europe was at the same time divided over the Hundred Years' War. Within Germany the "Great Civil War" resulted in the double election of two Emperors in 1314. An interdict was pronounced upon Germany and many were deprived

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He was a "short, stout, swarthy, obstinate, arrogant, stiff-necked, hot-blooded, bigoted old man without tact or prudence, lacking in even the common courtesies of life and entirely too prone to give ear to obsequious flatteries, whimsical, haughty, suspicious, super-critical, and at times choleric in his dealings with those about him." Quoted by Thompson and Johnson, op. cit., p. 973.



of the Church's rites and sacraments. It seemed as if the wrath of God was made doubly evident by the "Black Death" which first struck western Europe in 1347, and continued intermittently until 1363. At last, Basle in the Rhine valley was lowered by the "great earthquake" in the middle of the century. The abuses of the papal schism at last forced the two rival kings, Wenzel and Charles VI of France, "the one a confirmed drunkard and the other subject to fits of insanity,"<sup>4</sup> to meet at Rheims in 1398. Each determined to force the abdication of both popes. To make matters worse, this resulted in Boniface's encouraging the electors to choose a rival Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Rupert III, in 1400.

The effect of the prolonged scandal of the papal schism<sup>5</sup> was to cause a re-evaluation of papal power. Particularly in the universities such as Paris, Oxford, and Prague, arose the conciliar idea that the General Council represented the Church and is above the head, as the whole body is superior to any particular member. The cardinals at last called a General Council to meet at Pisa in 1409. The two popes "were not deposed simply on the ground of public advantage, or because they were not canonically elected; but distinct charges were brought against them, and the Council claimed the right to

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<sup>4</sup> R. Lodge, The Close of the Middle Ages, Period III (London: Rivingtons, 1915), p. 194.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 197.





impose the punishment of deposition."<sup>6</sup> Alexander V was chosen pope, and before measures of reform could be passed, the Council was dissolved. Ten months later he died, whereupon John XIII succeeded him. The papacy was now hopelessly divided into three pontiffs, for the other two refused to admit deposition. Furthermore, the conciliar theory was not attractive to the kings and princes who preferred not to see the rise of parliamentary government in the civitas terrena. However, it was expedient enough that Emperor Sigismund should call together another Council, this time at Constance in 1414. By 1417 the three popes were either deposed or had abdicated, and the schism ended by the election of Pope Martin V.

Not only was the fourteenth century a time of warfare between the civitas Dei and the civitas terrena, as well as schism within each city, but the state of the Church had greatly fallen. The Avignon papacy had increased its absolutism, demanding new fees and privileges of appointment. Even within the days of Innocent III,

the capture of Constantinople by the crusaders, the beginning of the Albigensian persecutions, the growth of the temporal power, the emergence of ecclesiastical abuses, such as provisions, indulgences, and the elaborated penitential system; these were all to bring discredit on the Papacy and to lessen its hold on the respect of Christendom. They were all symptoms of a loss of spirituality and of the adoption of material standards.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>

Lodge, op. cit., p. 200.

<sup>7</sup>

L. Elliot Binns, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Medieval Papacy (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1934), p. 101.





The fifteenth century saw the rise of popes as despotic Italian princes. The popes, usually aged when elected, were without experience in ruling a temporal state. Their political position was supported by appointing their "nephews" to appropriate positions. Each succeeding pope, however, dismissed his predecessor's appointments to make his own. The result was a shortsighted policy in the papacy. St. Bonaventura accused the clergy of corrupting the morals and doctrine of the laity. Monastic and mendicant orders drew contempt from the laity for their laxity and abuses. In the thirteenth century the friars had been opposed to the indulgence system, but in the fifteenth century they had become champions of it. Furthermore, trade was bringing in increased wealth, and from prosperity luxurious habits of one kind and another were steadily growing; pleasure and not<sup>8</sup> duty was becoming the end of life.

One of the forces which led to the unity of the thirteenth century was the development and acceptance of Scholasticism. The rise of universities, the recovery of Aristotle,<sup>9</sup> and the turning of mendicant orders to learning, brought about the "modern theology" which was to challenge the

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L. Elliot Binns, op. cit., p. 102.

9

Williston Walker, A History of the Christian Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p. 269.



Platonic tradition in Christianity. Indeed, the Latin Fathers were richly imbued with the spirit of Platonism through the early domination of Augustinianism. Whatever reverence there was, and there was a great deal, for the written word of antiquity, it demanded reconciliation with Christian doctrine. The re-awakened interest in Aristotelianism required its embrace with theology. At first, papal prohibitions were issued against the new interest in the universities, but so engrossing was this complete metaphysical system, unlike the fragmentary Platonism, that the prohibitions were disregarded.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, new light was shed upon the old problem of nominalism vs. realism.

The quest of Scholasticism was the unification of what was already known. Truth was "static, fixed, complete, and perfect for all eternity."<sup>11</sup> The spirit of the times was not found in the process, but in the product. The end was a static synthesis of all truth which could be handed down to succeeding generations without need of the process. The first endeavor was to be found in the Summa Theologica of Alexander of Hales. The Franciscan, however, failed to harmonize his still strong Augustinian influence with the newer Aristotelianism. Albertus Magnus and his pupil St. Thomas Aquinas, however,

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<sup>10</sup> C. G. Crump, and E. F. Jacob, The Legacy of the Middle Ages (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. 240.

<sup>11</sup> Randall, op. cit., p. 95.





were more successful. Albertus, an encyclopedist and commentator, who purified many of the Aristotelian texts from Arabian glosses, and anticipated Aquinas in many respects, was known everywhere as the "Universal Doctor."<sup>12</sup>

St. Thomas, like Albertus, and unlike Hales, began by divorcing philosophy from theology. Faith was only higher reason, and ultimate knowledge was only revealed by intuition and mystical experience. Aristotelian epistemology was naturalistic and empiricist. Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu.<sup>13</sup> Theology was concerned with revealed truth which natural reason was unable to obtain or demonstrate, yet the realm of philosophy, of that which was open to argument, overlapped. So far as human reason may go, it could not contradict theology, and where it did, reason submitted itself as corrupted by the fall of Adam.

If the Platonic-Augustinian tradition had held a belief in a metaphysical world-stuff which had independent existence apart from form, the theory was repugnant to Aquinas who maintained that there was an absolute correlativity of matter to form. And whereas the former tradition gave independent existence to body and soul so that upon death each was capable of continuing its substantial existence, though the corruptible body disintegrated sooner; Aquinas maintained that the

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<sup>12</sup>

Thompson and Johnson, op. cit., p. 709.

<sup>13</sup>

Crump and Jacob, op. cit., p. 242.



soul was the substantial form of the body. This led him to the embarrassing self-contradiction that upon death, the dissolution of form and matter, the unity of which is necessary to the real, the soul continues its separate individual existence.

Scholasticism was fraught with more contradictions than this. Aristotle's natural morality could never be synthesized with the Christian ideal. In the end, however, Scholasticism was successful for the medieval mind, which desired comprehensiveness and inclusiveness to consistency. The breadth and static unity of the Angelic Doctor's theology soon won the minds of the Church, and not until the devastating work of Duns Scotus was Scholasticism to disintegrate. Scotus, armed with Thomism, reconstructed the older Augustinian Scholasticism. His importance lay, however, in his critical and sceptical attack upon the pre-established unity of reason and revelation. Much of revealed doctrine which Aquinas had thought to demonstrate by natural theology proved to be undemonstrable. Likewise, the awakened rationalistic university minds were turning to the Averroist school of pure Aristotelianism freed from the Christian glosses of Thomism. And lastly, the revival of Nominalism by William of Ockham broke the last tie between logic and metaphysic. Nominalism had the effect of reducing all things to a matter of opinion. The new doctrine of two truths, that an idea may be true in philosophy and untrue in theology, and conversely, led to hopeless disillusionment. The resulting





scepticism at last led to the rising Humanism.

The decay of Scholasticism had its effects upon the papacy. It had reached its greatest triumph of unity at the same time as the papacy, and like the papacy, was, in the last analysis, based upon authority. Scholasticism had fortified the position of the papacy, and the latter had at last acted as patron to the "modern theology." With its collapse, papal prestige failed. Its own tenets of pragmatic judgment upon institutions as not mere devices but as elements completing the full life were turned upon the Church itself. And lastly, papal control had been weakened in the universities until in the fourteenth century, unlike the thirteenth, they were the chief assailants<sup>13</sup> of the papacy.

The century following the "Age of Faith" was to see the rise of new heresies. There had been attempts at papal and Church reform as well as the conciliar movement. But more than this, there was a new desire to be done with the organized Church based upon the sacramental system. John Wyclif, a master at Oxford, began in the latter part of the century to stress the verbal and literal interpretation of the Bible, unlike the allegorical method employed by many Scholastics. Personal devotion was to be cultivated, and whatever of outward sacraments and rites made mechanics of faith, he denounced. The

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13

Binns, op. cit., pp. 86-90.



hierarchy of the Church was false to the ideal of the early Church, in which each man was his own priest. Penance was rejected as a sacrament, as well as the doctrine of transubstantiation. He attacked the wealth of the Church and clergy as well as the state of monasticism. He fought papal interference and taxation in the affairs of England. At last, he organized a band of poor priests who were called Lollards. These further spread his dissenting views.

Like Wyclif, John of Husinec<sup>14</sup> objected strongly to many of the abuses and later doctrines of the Church. Although he was not in complete agreement with Wyclif, he did resist the whole theory of indulgences. He and his pupil, Jerome of Prague, as well as Wyclif, were suppressed by the papacy. The Hussite Church, however, continued in influence within Bohemia, establishing the "New Unity of Brotherhood," which rejected the doctrine of apostolic succession. In the sixteenth century it joined with the Lutheran schism.

Reflection of the disintegration of medieval unity was to be seen in the arts.<sup>15</sup> If the Gothic cathedral brought together all the artistic achievements of man in the thirteenth century, the fourteenth and the fifteenth were to see a new specialization comparable to the new independence of philosophy

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14

Thompson and Johnson, op. cit., p. 983.

15

Ibid., pp. 1022 ff.





and science. Freed from the conjunctive structure of architecture, painting and sculpture were free to develop unity in themselves. With Giotto (1266-1336) came the new interest in perspective painting. Monumental works of sculpture revealed a new endeavor of realism and human expression and passion. Even within the realm of sacred art the new liberality was felt. Savonarola complains<sup>16</sup> of saints being portrayed in modern dress, and of Pope Alexander VI's mistress, Julia Farnese, being portrayed by Pinturicchio as the blessed Virgin.

The decline of the "glorious age," however, was quickly leading to one of other and greater glory.

## II

Medieval Christianity had ostensibly crystallized itself into a body of law and of speculation. Dominant over all of life was the rising hierarchy of the Church which culminated in the Pope who was considered more God than man. The simplicity of Apostolic Christianity, the genuine outward expression of gratitude and love for the new birth within, the fellowship of martyrs and saints of the primitive Church were now to be supplanted by the intrigues of power-seeking popes, princely cardinals, and lascivious papal courts. The increased importance of the "Sacraments and other holy transactions" replaced

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<sup>16</sup>

Binns, op. cit., p. 279.



17

preaching and other methods of personal pastoral influences. Similarly, the Latin Scriptures and discourses of the Fathers became increasingly unintelligible to the laity, as indeed to the priests themselves. Portions of Scripture were read in conjunction with the Mass and were expounded in short sermons, it is true, but they were of limited comprehension. Personal piety and devotion were displaced by the system of indulgences, lucrative use of the confessional, and a doctrine of good works which fostered Pelagianism. And lastly, the crusade, pilgrimages, and the encouraged veneration of relics misguided the true intent of the Christian faith.

On the other hand, the Church jealously guarded its Scholastic speculations which under the growing Humanism were suffering bitter attack. Scholasticism itself had become sterile, static, and unimaginative. Its speculation had become useless debate over "universals" and "particulars," and the equally fine distinction of propositions being true in one realm of life while false in another.

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If Christianity as it actually exists in the world is the outward ecclesiastical organization, the sacramental

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C. Ullmann, Reformers before the Reformation (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1855), Vol. II, p. 256. The Lutheranism of Ullmann is too great here, as frequently, to allow adequate evaluation.

18

Ibid., p. 254.





system of grace, and its historical formularies, it is also the inward piety of the Church's priests and its members, and the living faith of its creeds. It was the latter which was largely absent from the medieval, and which was to reassert itself in the modern era of Christianity. Mysticism and subjectivism were to find expression in the unbridled German speculative mysticism, and later, in the individualistic "liberty" of Protestantism which too readily forfeited the historical (and objective) organization, sacraments, and formularies.

The age, however, was not without its witnesses to another truth of Christianity. Before Scholasticism had hardly begun,<sup>19</sup> St. Bernard of Clairvaux, fearing the growing rationalization of the Christian faith, turned in his theological treatises to the creative influences of mystical religion. Heresy, at the same time, was odious to him, as well as the widespread iniquity. The Victorines and St. Francis represent this same witness to religion of the heart rather than of the mind. The wranglings of the Scholastics brought from St. Francis:

Suppose that you have enough subtlety and science to know all things, that you are acquainted with all language, the course of the stars and all the rest, what have you to be proud of? A single demon in hell knows more than all the men on earth put together. But there

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See Sheldon Cheney, Men Who Have Walked With God (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), pp. 168-175, for an admirable short account of St. Bernard.



is one thing of which the demon is incapable, and which is the glory of man: to be faithful to God. 20

Such restrained and balanced mysticism, however, did not mark the later period of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

<sup>21</sup>  
Pantheistic mystics were heralded before Innocent III. The Waldenses, the sisterhoods of the Beguines, and the brother-  
<sup>22</sup>  
hoods of Beghards who later became the Brethren of the Free  
<sup>23</sup>  
Spirit, as well as the Libertines, were all to mark a period of growing heresy, "impractical" speculation, and lowered moral behavior.

Two forces were obviously at play. On the one hand, the developed externalism of the Church and the formal sterility of Scholasticism led to the inward mysticism and to a new appreciation of the natural and simple. On the other hand, monachism,

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Randall, op. cit., p. 100. Quoted from P. Sabatier, Life of St. Francis, Chap. XVII.

21

Rufus M. Jones, Studies in Mystical Religion (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1936), Chaps. X and XI.

22

Ibid., p. 197.

23

"In defiance of the imposing power of the Church, the only way open to them was by secret societies and clandestine meetings. Accordingly they constructed for themselves remote, and often subterraneous habitations, which they called Paradises, and where by night, and especially on the nights of festivals, persons of both sexes used to assemble. On such occasions, one of their apostles came forward, and taking off his clothes, and exemplifying in his own person the state of innocence, delivered a discourse upon the free intercourse of the sexes, which the law of marriage, contrary to nature, had supplanted. The sequel, if we may credit reports, was of a kind which forbids description." Ullmann, op. cit., p. 17. This group is not alone in representing the same extreme and for the same reasons: Blake, etc.





though its ideals were corrupted in the existing orders, still presented itself to the medieval mind as the purest form of practical Christian life. There were, therefore, many brotherhoods and sisterhoods of free association which allowed the devout this expression of community life.

The Dominican, Heinrich Eckhart, represents the best of the earlier fourteenth century German mystics. He studied at Paris where he received the title "Meister."<sup>24</sup> In the Dominican Order he attained to the position of Vicar-General for Bohemia and Provincial-Prior for Saxony. As a preacher to Strasburg and later at Cologne he brought his message to the peasants in their native German and to the scholars in Latin. Highly influenced by Plotinus, Dionysius, and Erigena, Meister Eckhart taught that the soul or "Inner Man" must free itself from all worldliness, sense experience, and understand that "between God and man alone is there no difference, no separation, but Oneness."<sup>25</sup> "When I attain this blessedness of union, then all things are in me and in God, and where I am there God is, and where God is there am I."<sup>26</sup> The soul, however, is not completely lost in God, for "God has left a little point wherein the soul turns back upon itself and knows itself to be a

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<sup>24</sup>

See Jones, op. cit., Chap. XII.

<sup>25</sup>

Quoted by Cheny, op. cit., p. 195.

<sup>26</sup>

Quoted by Jones, op. cit., p. 233.



creature."<sup>27</sup>

For all his learning, one of the great truths Eckhart stood for was that "the less theorizing you do about God, the more receptive you are to His in-pouring."<sup>28</sup>

Likewise in Germany there existed the group known as the "Friends of God."<sup>29</sup> Influenced by Meister Eckhart as well as by the apocalyptic prophetesses St. Hildegarde, St. Elizabeth of Schoener, and St. Matilda of Magdeburg, and modelled after the Beghards, they opposed the antinomianism of their predecessors and contemporaries. Located principally in Strasburg, Cologne, and Basle, there was little organization to the Friends beyond that given by the local "leader." It was a lay movement that discovered a new spiritual life outside the mediation of the Church, though they in no way sought vindication against the Church.

The brilliant lights among the Friends were John Tauler and Henry Suso, who, like Eckhart, were both Dominicans. The Reverend P. Pourrat has admirably summarized this German mysticism under three headings:

<sup>27</sup>

Quoted by Jones, op. cit., p. 233, from Pfeiffer, 387.

<sup>28</sup>

Quoted by Cheney, op. cit., p. 196.

<sup>29</sup>

See Jones, op. cit., Chap. XIII.



....the total renunciation of ourselves, of our own will, and absolute submission to the divine will which prepares for union with God; the nakedness of the intelligence or its being completely stripped of every sensible and intellectual image, conditional to this union; finally, mystical union itself, which takes place by means of a kind of return of the soul to the divine unity. 30

If the Friends of God were opposed to antinomianism, they were guilty of over-asceticism and scourgings, abusing and inflicting punishment upon their bodies. Furthermore, they held a naive faith in the wonder-miracles of relics. Henry of Nördlingen was responsible for the excesses in this respect. And lastly, they were guilty of highly apocalyptic imagery, and were themselves subject to collective hallucination.

31

Blessed Jan van Ruysbroek was an intimate friend of Tauler and Suso of the Friends of God, as well as of Gerard Groote, the founder of the Brothers of the Common Life. And in reality, he stood midway between the two groups. He was born in 1304 of humble parentage, reared in the home of a priest, Jan Hinckaert (Joannes Gereimus), educated in Latin schools, and at the age of twenty-four was ordained priest. Later in his life, with Jan Hinckaert and a mutual friend and canon, he formed a "mystical community" in the forests of Groenendael,

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Rev. P. Pourrat, Christian Spirituality in the Middle Ages (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne Lt., 1924), Vol. II, pp. 228 f.

31

Jones, op. cit., p. 308.

32

See Introduction by Joseph Bolland, S.J., of The Seven





living simply, performing manual labor, caring for the poor, and meditating. To avoid the difficulties of the harassing nearby canons of St. Gudule and the Duke of Brabant's horsemen, they took the vows of the Augustinian Canons. Although prior of the monastery, Ruysbroek always entered upon his share of the community's responsibilities and duties. It is told of him that he

insisted on working at the humblest tasks in the monastery garden, carrying loads of dung and weeding the beds. His efforts were regarded with a reverent indulgence by his fellow gardeners, to whom they were something of a burden; for he worked with one hand, while telling his beads with the other, nor did he distinguish the flowers and vegetables from the weeds, but pulled up all in his holy and humble ardour. 33

It is noteworthy that Ruysbroek was fond of nature; it was in the forest of Groenendael that he wrote his great mystical treatises, whereas, as we shall see, the world of nature was a distraction to the blessed Thomas à Kempis. Ruysbroek distinguished between three types of life: <sup>34</sup> the active life of discipline and good works; the inward life which marks a change of intention, the active life now springing from sheer love; and the contemplative life in which "God possesses us and we Him in

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Steps of the Ladder of Spiritual Love by The Blessed Jan van Ruysbroeck, translated by F. Sherwood Taylor (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1944).

33

Bollard, op. cit., p. 14.

34

See Jones, op. cit., pp. 308-314.



unity, and we enjoy God and rest in blessedness."<sup>35</sup> It must not be misunderstood, however, that Ruysbroek taught a unity of man and God whereby the soul loses its identity. He says that "it is impossible for us to become God and lose our created essence," but "overwhelmed in love we are one with God."<sup>36</sup>

No "impractical" mystic himself, Ruysbroek exemplified his own teaching: "The act of life must drive man outwardly to practice virtue; the act of death must drive him into God, in the depths of his own being. These are the two movements of the perfect life, united as matter and form, as soul and body."<sup>37</sup>

We now turn to the lives of several of his contemporaries.

### III

Son of the wealthy and prosperous Werner Groote,<sup>38</sup> Sheriff and Burgomaster of Deventer, Gerard was sent at the age of fifteen to the University of Paris, where "in virtue of his good understanding, a Master of Arts degree was conferred upon

<sup>35</sup> Quoted by Jones, op. cit., p. 312.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 313, quoted from Book of the Sparkling Stone.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 313 f.

<sup>38</sup> Ullmann, op. cit., p. 61.





him in the eighteenth year of his age."<sup>39</sup> It has been contend-  
<sup>40</sup>ed that he was not an exceptional scholar; his Latin contained barbarisms; he lacked acquaintance with Hebrew and Greek (with which few of his contemporaries were familiar!); and he confined his reading to the Holy Scriptures, the Canonists, and the Church Fathers. It is to be noted, however, that his favorites among the latter were Augustine and Bernard. Beyond this, "Gerard had been skilled in astrology and necromancy, and before his conversion had been in the habit of displaying some few tricks of the art of magic."<sup>41</sup> "Having gained this degree, and being fired by a natural genius and puffed up with worldly knowledge, he was rewarded with preferment in the Church, and received amongst other benefices a Canonry in the Church of Aix."<sup>42</sup> His ecclesiastical career at the time seemed to follow the general worldly cleric life: "He had loved luxury...., he used to go forth clad in fair attire and with a silver girdle: and while among the canons he had worn a sumptuous surplice

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39

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders of the New Devotion, being the lives of Gerard Groote, Florentius Radewin and their Followers (translated into English by J. P. Arthur (London: Kegan, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1905), p. 7. (Hereafter cited as The Founders.)

40

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 60.

41

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 37.

42

Ibid., p. 7.



and a fair almuce: likewise he had indulged his body with delicate food and costly wine:....(and) had been wont to anoint his head and delicately to tire his hair."<sup>43</sup>

Gerard had gone to Cologne where, while he was wandering idly and watching the worldly games,<sup>44</sup> a hermit of that town approached him saying, "Why standest thou thus intent upon empty things. Thou oughtest to become another man."<sup>45</sup> The occurrence did not bring immediate change in the life of Gerard, but later there was to be another who would likewise exhort him to change his ways. This was Henry de Calcar,<sup>46</sup> an old Parisian friend, who had become Prior of the Carthusian Monastery in Monichuysen. Zealous for souls, the light of the Heavenly Life burned within him. Coming to Utrecht, where Gerard was abiding, he sought him out and admonished him for his worldliness, saying, "How great are the gifts promised to those that follow Christ!"<sup>47</sup> "The grace of God," explains Thomas à Kempis,<sup>48</sup> "was present with them during this holy converse, which was oftentimes repeated....At length he resolved to change his mode of life for

<sup>43</sup>

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, pp. 29 f.

<sup>44</sup>

Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>45</sup>

Loc. cit.

<sup>46</sup>

Jones, op. cit., p. 315. It is spelled here "Kalkar." Ullmann, op. cit., p. 62, says "Henry Aegar."

<sup>47</sup>

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup>

Loc. cit.



a better, and by the favour of God to renounce the pomps of the world." And on a time that he had fallen ill "he renounced all unlawful arts in the presence of a priest, and gave the books that dealt of such vanities to be burned in the fire."<sup>49</sup>

Now lest the holy seed planted by God in his heart should be trodden underfoot, "the humble Gerard resolved to go apart for a time, to separate himself carefully from worldly sights and converse, to release his mind from all the cares of the world, and to be at leisure for the things of God only, and for his own soul."<sup>50</sup> Resigning all his preferments and changing his secular dress for a simple habit,<sup>51</sup> he took himself to the Carthusian monastery at Monichuysen<sup>52</sup> where he mortified the flesh, fasted, and prayed.<sup>53</sup> The brethren, seeing that his ability lay in preaching rather than in living the cloistered life, advised that he should take Holy Orders. However, so great respect did he have for the priesthood, that he would not allow that he be raised higher than Deacon.<sup>54</sup> Obtaining a

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49

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 38.

50

Ibid., p. 13.

51

Ibid., p. 11.

52

Ibid., p. 14.

53

Ibid., Chap. VII.

54

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 63. Gerard said concerning Florentius Radewin, "Once only did I cause a man to be ordained to the priesthood and I believe that he is worthy. In future I





license from Florentius von Wevelinchoven, Bishop of Utrecht,  
<sup>55</sup>  
 he preached throughout the diocese. <sup>56</sup> Speaking to the hearts  
 of men, and in their own Dutch tongue, <sup>57</sup> "using the writings of  
 the Scriptures as the weapon with which he was armed," <sup>58</sup> he de-  
 nounced before clerks and layfolk their wickedness, and maintained  
 wholesome, true, Evangelical and Apostolic doctrine as against  
 heretics, usurers and clerks that live in concubinage. <sup>59</sup> "He  
 was able to persuade his hearers to despise the world not only  
 by words of human wisdom but even more by the example of his  
 godly conversation." Thomas à Kempis well says:

He was of a cheerful countenance, and in speech  
 kindly; calm in mind and humble in clothing; in food  
 abstinent, in counsel wise, in judgment discreet.  
 Towards evil he was stern, toward virtue zealous. Flee-  
 ing from idleness he ever exercised himself with some-  
 thing profitable to edification: he loved simplicity and  
 followed lowliness, thinking upon heavenly things. He  
 was apt to understand hidden matters, and was never too  
 occupied for reading and prayer. Having God ever before  
 his eyes he jealously guarded the rights of the Church.  
 He set a good example to men of the world, seeking no  
 temporal advantage from his preaching, thinking only of  
 the profit of souls, and preaching the Gospel without  
 price and without money from the Church. 60

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will be cautious not to do such a thing lightly, for I perceive  
 that few are fit for such a calling." Thomas à Kempis, The  
Founders, p. 102.

<sup>55</sup>

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 64.

<sup>56</sup>

Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>57</sup>

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 42.

<sup>58</sup>

Letter to the Bishop of Utrecht, quoted by Thomas à  
 Kempis, The Founders, p. 74.

<sup>59</sup>

Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>60</sup>

Ibid., p. 42.



What a strange sight the blessed Gerard must have been to those people whose hearts were aching for such "good news" when all about them the Church appeared worldly and broken! It was no wonder that

such was the inclination amongst the people to hear the Word of God, that the Church could scarcely contain the crowd that came together. Many left their food, and being drawn by an hunger after righteousness postponed their urgent business and ran together to hear his discourses: he often delivered two sermons in one day, and sometimes continued preaching for three hours or more when fervency of spirit took hold upon him. 61

Now it so happened that

the pious and humble Master Gerard, hearing of the great and widespread fame of John Ruysbroek, a monk and Prior at Groenendael, near Brussels, went to the parts about Brabant, although the journey was long, in order to see in bodily presence this holy and most devout father; for he longed to see face to face, and with his own eyes, one whom he had known hitherto only by common report and by his books; and to hear with his own ears that voice utter its words from a living human mouth—a voice as gracious as if it were the very mouthpiece of the Holy Ghost. He took with him therefore that revered man Master John Cele,<sup>[62]</sup> the director of the school of Zwolle, a devout and faithful lover of Jesus Christ; for their mind and heart were at one in the Lord, and the fellowship of each was pleasant to the other, and this resolve was kindled within them that their journey, which was undertaken for the sake of spiritual edification, should redound in the case of each to the Glory of God.

There went also with them a faithful and devout layman, named Gerard the Shoemaker, as their guide upon the narrow way, and their inseparable companion in this happy undertaking.

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61

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, pp. 43 f.

62

Of whom we shall learn more later. It is well to keep in mind here their friendship and this journey together.





When they came to the place called Groenendaël, they saw no lofty or elaborate buildings therein, but rather all the signs of simplicity of life and poverty, such as marked the first footsteps of our Heavenly King when He, the Lord of Heaven, came upon this earth as a Virgin's Son, and in exceeding poverty. As they entered the gate of the monastery, that holy father, the devout Prior, met them, being a man of great age, of kindly serenity, and one to be revered for his honourable character. He it was whom they had come to see, and saluting them with the greatest benignity as they advanced, and being taught by a revelation from God, he called upon Gerard by his very name and knew him, though he had never seen him before. After their salutation he took them with him into the inner parts of the cloister, as his most honoured guests, and with a cheerful countenance, and a heart yet more joyful<sup>63</sup> showed them all due courtesy and kindness as if he were entertaining Jesus Christ Himself.

Gerard abode there for a few days conferring with this man of God about Holy Scriptures; and from him he heard many heavenly secrets which, as he confessed, were past his understanding. 64

It seemed unfortunate at the time that "some persons of corrupt mind, lovers of the world and followers of luxurious living, often spoke against Gerard, for they hated the way of truth, and were enemies of every good thing."<sup>65</sup> Such seems the

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63

Ballard, op. cit., p. 14, relates: "To Gerard's temperament, less happy than that of Ruysbroeck, the fear of hell was often present. He sought to impress the necessity of that fear upon Ruysbroeck, who answered him: 'Master Gerard, truly I am troubled by no fear, for lo! I am ready with even mind to suffer all that God has decreed concerning me, whether unto life or unto death. Nothing is better, more salutary, or more pleasant to me, nor do I choose or desire anything else than that He should find me ever ready to accept the judgment of His will.'"

64

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, Chap. X.

65

Ibid., p. 19.



case when one as blessed as Gerard admonishes his fellow clergy before their very flocks. Complaint was brought to the Bishop of Utrecht to withdraw Gerard's license to preach.<sup>66</sup> Gerard met the situation by praying earnestly for those that slandered him,<sup>67</sup> and declared, "I do receive the doctrine of submission to the Bishop, to whom I pray deference in this respect."<sup>68</sup>

After only five years<sup>69</sup> of successful preaching, and while he was still young, what seemed a misfortune became a greater blessing.<sup>70</sup> Already he had set down for himself a rule and "a Public Profession of Faith" which was a further elaboration<sup>71</sup> of that rule. "Many who heard his discourse were pricked to the heart, and coming to him yielded themselves to his direction, putting away all the vanity of the world. Some also in their zeal for charity remained virgin, and some who had taken the vow of continency gathered together others with them for the service of God."<sup>72</sup> Already the seeds of the Common Life were being planted.

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66

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 66.

67

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 40.

68

Ibid., p. 53.

69

Jones, op. cit., p. 319.

70

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, Chap. XI.

71

Ibid., Chap. XVIII.

72

Ibid., pp. 18 f.





73

In returning from their visit at Groenendael, Cele and Gerard had gone to Paris where they purchased a number of books for the education of Cele's youths. Returning to Deventer, his preaching license having been revoked, Gerard took to counseling the young men attending the school in that city who came to eat at his table and to converse with him. Later he began to give them employment by having them copy Holy Scripture and the Fathers. Not only was he able in this manner to gain new manuscripts for his library, but he gave employment to the students, for it is to be remembered that his father was Burgomaster, and as well, it gave him an opportunity to teach the youth about what was dearest in his life. Already there were with him two close friends. The one was John of Zutphen, who was surnamed Brinckerinc,

a devout clerk of stablished character and one dedicated to God from his youth: he was wont to recite the "Hours" with Gerard, and to accompany him hither and thither when he preached, and Gerard loved him with the love of a father for his son, for indeed he was a youth of an excellent spirit, well beloved of God and man, and scarcely could be torn from his master's side. 74

75

The same was a clergyman. The other close companion was Florentius Radewin, "Vicar of Deventer, having been converted by the preaching of the venerable Gerard Groote, the grace of

73

Ullmann, op. cit., pp. 68 f.

74

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 31.

75

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 69.





God working therein."<sup>76</sup>

On a day this Florentius said to Gerard, "Dear master, what harm would it do were I and these clerks, who are here copying, to put our weekly earnings into a common fund and live together?" "Live together!" replied Gerard, "the mendicant monks would never permit it; they would do their worst to prevent us." "But what," said Florentius, "is to prevent us making the trial? Perhaps God would give us success." "Well, then," said Gerard, "in God's name commence. I will be your advocate, and faithfully defend you against all who rise up against you."<sup>77</sup>

No doubt we can see the influence of John van Ruysbroek's adventure in community life in Gerard's ready acceptance of Florentius' plan. Indeed, Gerard had written to the brothers at Groenendael, "I do still burn and sigh for your presence, to be renewed and inspired by your spirit and to be a partaker thereof."<sup>78</sup> It was this group of clerks who began living together under the roof of Gerard Groote, and who came to be known as the Brothers of the Common Life. We shall presently examine more closely the founding of the Brothers. It is to be noted here that they flourished and expanded elsewhere.

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<sup>76</sup>

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>77</sup>

Quoted by Ullmann, op. cit., p. 70, from Daventr. illustr., p. 30.

<sup>78</sup>

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 25.



79

It had been Gerard's desire<sup>80</sup> to provide a monastery for those brothers who desired to follow the way of holiness according to the Canons Regular of St. Augustine,<sup>81</sup> as well as to release them from the harassing of the mendicant orders.<sup>82</sup> However, he died prematurely. A friend had been struck with the plague,<sup>83</sup> and Gerard, having some medical knowledge, had gone to his aid. He himself contracted the disease, and calling together the Brothers, said: "Lo! I am called of the Lord, and the time of my dissolution is at hand. Augustine and Bernard are knocking at the door; and I may not go beyond the bounds which God hath set to my life."<sup>84</sup> He then said: "Behold Florentius, my beloved disciple, in whom the Holy Spirit hath found a resting place, shall be to you a father and ruler. Take him in my stead, hear him, and obey his counsel. I know none like him, none whom I esteem so highly, or in whom I have such confidence. Him must ye love and reverence as a father."

79

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 45. How much this was truly his desire we shall presently examine.

80

As had John van Ruysbroek.

81

Albert Hyma, The Christian Renaissance (New York: The Century Co., 1925), p. 49.

82

Ibid., p. 17.

83

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 47.

84

Ibid., p. 48.





"He died as the sun was sinking, between the fifth and sixth hours in the thirteenth hundred and eighty-fourth year after our Lord's Incarnation."<sup>85</sup>

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If it was the blessed and holy Gerard Groote who founded the Brothers of the Common Life, it was the saintly and devout Florentius Radewin who built the community. If Gerard was the living spirit of the Brothers, it was Florentius who provided the methodical leadership. Florentius

was born in the city of Leerdam, in the territory of the noble Count de Erkell; this city is situated near the boundary of Holland and about three miles from Utrecht. His father, Radewin, was well known by repute amongst those of his time; and being sufficiently endowed with goods and substance, considering the needs of his condition in life, he gave his fatherly consent and assistance to his son Florentius when the latter was setting forth study at Prague. At this time the privileged University of Prague in Bohemia was in a most flourishing state, and many men went more eagerly thither from the Low Countries. He soon became a good scholar,<sup>[86]</sup> for he was brilliant in understanding and eager to go forward in knowledge, and in like manner he was noted amongst the students for kindness to his intimates and reverence toward his teacher. Afterward he returned to his own country and his kindred, and having gained his Master's Degree was received with honour.<sup>87</sup>

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85

Thomas à Kempis, op. cit., p. 49.

86

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 83, claims, "Florentius was even a less accomplished scholar than Gerard....," giving as his only evidence that he "never willingly involved himself in subtle questions or profound speculations that could not minister to edification." Taking this position, it is difficult to explain the Brother's interest in education and Gerard's and Florentius' love of books.

87

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 91.



We are fortunate to have the following description from Thomas à Kempis concerning Florentius.

He was eminent for his honourable character, his cheerfulness amongst his comrades, his kindliness in word and generosity in spending. He was comely to look upon, of graceful figure and of moderate height. For a certain time God allowed him to mingle in the world, and learn by experience the deceitful madness thereof, but not to abide the hazard all the days of his life. 89

Upon his return from the University, his chariot nearly collided with another along a narrow road. Calling upon our Saviour, and being delivered from the danger, Florentius ascribed the whole matter "to a miracle wrought on his behalf by God." 90 Later it happened that

when Gerard was preaching to large congregations in the Church of S. Mary at Deventer, Master Florentius came also, eagerly listening for what he should say; and being outwardly instructed in wisdom through the light of this heavenly discourse, he was pricked to the heart, and soon became enlightened inwardly. 91

Coming together they held sweet converse upon the things that pertain to salvation; the heart of each burned with an heavenly flame; the things of earth were of none account, but their good purpose to hold to the service of God was confirmed. For setting an holy life before them, and being zealous to keep citizenship in the country of the Lord, they were made thenceforward of one mind in the love of the Brotherhood. And the manifold grace of Christ was present with them so that they were

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88

See the entire chapter V, Thomas à Kempis, The Founders,

89

Ibid., p. 92.

90

Loc. cit.

91

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 94.





profitable to salvation not only for themselves but also for their neighbors: for certain learned men and eloquent preachers were added [92] to them, for their comfort and fuller joy and for the adornment of the House of our God. These, burning fiercely with that flame which is the gift of the Holy Spirit, chose to walk closely in the footprints of Christ: to despise the world, to wage bold warfare against sin, and so to pass to eternal goodness. 93

This was the community of the Brothers of the Common Life.

Already, however, Florentius had gathered together—due to his preaching in Utrecht—many young men and maidens who,

relying on his wholesome counsels, leaving parents and friends, began to walk in the paths of humility and devotion, and hating the life of the world to associate themselves together in Christ after the Apostolic manner; and they rejoiced with eager hearts to keep a Common table, and to have meagre sustenance....[He] exhorted them severally to go forward in the steps of virtue, to pray often; to labour with their hands in due season; to be instant in reading holy books, and in earnest meditation.....94

95

He resigned the canonry of St. Peter's in Utrecht, and came to Deventer where he lived with Gerard. After the Brothers had been established upon the simple rule of Gerard, the latter,

seeing that his beloved disciple Florentius was adorned with special gifts of devotion, determined that he should be promoted to the Priesthood, being moved thereunto by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and urged by the prayers of many Brethren. But Florentius, protesting that he was unworthy of so great honour, humbly sought to be relieved of this burden; yet he was overborne by the insistence of the Brethren, and at length not

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92

Among them, we remember, was John Brinkerinc.

93

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 96.

94

Ibid., p. 97.

95

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 82.





daring to resist the monitions of Gerard he gave that  
 assent to which the duty of obedience compelled him. 96  
 97 He was then made vicar of St. Lebuin's, "and though he was  
 the senior Vicar in Deventer he always took his place on the  
 left side of the Choir in the lower stall, although he was en-  
 98 titled to the highest seat next to the Canons." His presence  
 99 in the choir had a profound effect upon the others, his appear-  
 100 ance brought veneration, and his dress was always simple  
 101 and poor. He had compassion upon the poor, the sick, and the  
 102 friendless, feeding the poor and washing the beggars. 103  
 104 He was patient, gentle, and loving toward all men, and among  
 105 the Brothers he took his share of common duty. Upon himself

96

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 102.

97

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 82.

98

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 103.

99

Ibid., p. 104.

100

Loc. cit.

101

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, Chap. XII.

102

Ibid., Chap. XV.

103

Ibid., Chap. XVI.

104

Ibid., Chap. XXII.

105

Ibid., Chaps. XIII, XIV.



he weighed heavy infirmities and long abstinences,<sup>106</sup> praying  
often, and exhorting others to prayer.<sup>107</sup> Such was the man to  
whom Gerard entrusted his Brothers.

## IV

In view of the fact that the monasteries of Canons Regular which were fostered by the Brothers became luxurious institutions of indolence,<sup>108</sup> while the semi-monastic Brothers continued on the whole faithful to their purpose under God, it is difficult to understand why the little that has been written about the Brothers became in the end a discursion into the history of the monasteries. It is our purpose here to record the history of the Brothers as a semi-monastic group. That they ever became attached in any way to the Augustinian Rule was an expediency and condescension to external forces rather than the ideal of Gerard Groote.

<sup>109</sup> Hyma traces the roots of the Brothers to Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and Seneca; the greatest example, however, was set by our Lord and His disciples, and later by the Fathers and the saints. Hyma disavows any influence from Germany,

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106

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, Chap. XVII.

107

Ibid., Chap. XXIII.

108

Ullmann, op. cit., pp. 87 and 94.

109

Hyma, op. cit., p. 301.





contending that Gerard opposed Eckhart, cared little for Tauler, and ascribed Suso's Horologium to Anselm. It is significant that at Deventer, Zwolle, and Windesheim no mention is made of the great work of mysticism, the Theologia Germanica. On the other hand, we have seen that the community begun by Ruysbroek had a profound effect upon Gerard so that at the casual suggestion of Florentius, Gerard was ready to found the Brothers of the Common Life.

There were other reasons observable to the historian. Two movements were on foot: a new and more earnest, and greatly needed, example of monachism; and a new means of expression of simple inward piety or mysticism. Indeed, it was through the working of God that Gerard was sent into the world and that about him there were such men as Florentius, John Cele, and John Brinkerinc.

Gerard's conversion had been sometime during the year 110 111  
 1374. On September 21 of that same year he ceded the use of his house for a community of poor women. In 1379 Gerard wrote a rule for the poor women who had taken his house. The 112  
 Rule of the House of Master Gerard stated that this was not a new monastic order or "beguinage," but simply a place for

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110 Hyma, op. cit., p. 10.

111 Ibid., p. 41.

112 Summarized by Hyma, op. cit., pp. 41 ff.



those devout women to worship God in peace. As a matter of fact, the venture could hardly have been recognized as monastic: there were no binding vows; the only rule in this respect was that none could re-enter having once left. They were still members of the local parish as all other laymen. Their dress was to be no different, unlike the dress of nuns and beguines, although it was to be simple. On entering the House no one was expected to cede her property, although all the women were to work in common, sharing expenses as well as income. Work was assigned according to ability, and although the women practiced the expected skills of spinning, weaving, and sewing, they also excelled in agricultural and dairy produce.

All of the women did not live in the House. Those who did not live there would seem to be those who later aided Gerard by providing homes for the students who came to the school. Their relation was of the nature of Tertiaries and at last be-  
 113  
 came lost to our sight. Those who remained in the House were not allowed to travel more than ten miles away, or to be absent more than eight days. They were to avoid familiar intercourse with men.

At first they had one matron, but later they had two. These matrons acted not only as treasurers, but were also given authority to administer discipline upon consulting with two



sisters. In 1383<sup>114</sup> John van den Gronde was appointed as their first Rector, and in 1435 a Procurator was also appointed.

It would seem, then, that Gerard had thus founded the House a year before his intimate relationship with Florentius in 1380, and that it was a Brother House similar to it that Florentius had in mind when he remarked that those living together should unite their funds.

The exact date of the founding of the Brothers is obscured by the fact that there were under the direction of Gerard a number of students, girls<sup>115</sup> as well as boys, to whom he gave employment. Then there were also copyists who resided with Gerard and in Florentius' vicarage.<sup>116</sup> It was the latter who had found a community spirit of brotherhood, as well as indifference to temporal things, due to the zeal and ardor promoted by Gerard and his disciple, and not the school children,<sup>117</sup> who were to become the first Brothers. When the Common Life began it is uncertain,<sup>118</sup> but Gerard had set down the Rule in July or August of 1384.<sup>119</sup> It was sometime between 1380 and 1384

114

According to Hyma. However, Thomas à Kempis' records (The Founders, p. 173), "He remained in the same house until the death of Master Gerard, after whose happy departure he went to the House appointed."

115

Hyma, op. cit., p. 45.

116

Ibid., p. 59.

117

Ibid., pp. 44 ff.

118

Ibid., pp. 44 and 59.

119

Ibid., p. 59.





that the Brother House was founded. Before he died on August 20, 1384, Gerard appointed Florentius as his successor.

Florentius had continued to live in the vicarage. The members who lived with him had increased so that it was necessary in 1391 to build a new house upon a lot in the Pontsteeg which had been offered to them by the devout lady Zwedera of Runen.<sup>120</sup> This became known as the House of Florentius.

The close friend of Gerard, John Cele, who had accompanied Gerard on the visit to Ruysbroek, had gone far in imitating the holy man. Holding the priesthood in such great respect, he likewise refused Holy Orders,<sup>121</sup> and also spent two years at the same Carthusian monastery at Monnikhuizen near Arnheim. He returned, however, into the world and to Zwolle where he instituted certain reforms which we shall presently consider. So great was the renown of the school at Zwolle that as many as<sup>122</sup> 1200 students came, some far from the Yssel valley.

It was here that Henry Foppens of Gouda,<sup>123</sup> imitating Gerard, of whom he was an early disciple, and probably influenced by John Cele himself, bought a house to lodge some of the poorer students. Henry Foppens, with the blind but pious John

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<sup>120</sup> Hyma, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., pp. 89 f. A priest and leader of the Sisters.



Ummen, who became their first rector and procurator, and two laymen, lived the Common Life. Later they moved to a site upon Mount St. Agnes to which Gerard had suggested that they move.<sup>124</sup> However, they were now three miles from the town; too far for the students to come for employment. A second institution was built upon the election to the Bishopric of Utrecht of Frederick van Blakenheim. Another disciple, Meynoldus of Winderheim, sold his property and came to Zwolle where he housed several students in his humble dwelling. Of so great success was this venture that in 1396 the fine building, House of St. Gregory, was built. A number of priests and clerics joined in the Common Life following the Rule at Deventer, and Gerard Scadde of Calcar was ordained priest with the consent of Florentius and made rector.<sup>125</sup>

In the meanwhile the Brothers at Deventer built in 1398<sup>126</sup> a Nova Domus or Domus Pauperum, which was for the poorer students at the cathedral school. These students were given material aid and spiritual direction, but it was not until after 1400 that the undergraduates could become Brothers. In

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124

It is inferred by Hyma (op. cit., p. 90) that it was because of hostilities of the Bishop of Utrecht, Frederick van Wevelinkhove.

125

The details of this community are given by Hyma, op. cit., pp. 89 ff. from M. Schoengen, Die Schule von Zwolle, Jacobus Traiecti narratio.

126

Ibid., pp. 60 f.





time, similar houses were built at Zwolle where eventually<sup>127</sup> there were 2200 pupils. These included houses for wealthy boys, for those who paid full tuition, for those who paid for part of their expenses, and for those who could pay nothing at all.<sup>128</sup> The Brothers at Zwolle were not dependent upon manuscript copying for income, for a great deal of property had<sup>129</sup> been donated to them.

The growth and spread<sup>130</sup> of the Brothers were far-reaching. Deventer and Zwolle, however, remained the two important centers. In 1395 Florentius was asked to found a House at Amersfoort, and again in 1403 the magistrates of Delft, desirous of copyists and teachers, requested a congregation to be founded in their city. For a few years there was a House at Hoorn. The congregations at Zwolle founded other houses as well. In 1406 they established one at Albergen near Hattem, and one in 1424 at 's-Hertogenbosch. In 1425, forced by an interdict, the congregation at Zwolle moved to Doesburg, founding another community there in 1426. Other houses founded by the Zwolle congregation were at Gröningen between 1426 and

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127

Hyma, op. cit., p. 126.

128

Ibid., p. 109.

129

Loc. cit.; again Hyma quotes here M. Schoengen.

130

Again we are dependent upon Hyma, the only English source for the detailed growth of the Brothers. All of the following information is to be found in Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 110 ff.



1432, and at Harderwijk on the Zuiderzee in 1441. 131

These congregations in turn fostered other houses, the Delft community establishing a House at Gouda in 1445, and one at Utrecht in 1474. The Brothers at 's-Hertogenbosch founded one at Nijmegen in 1469 or 1470. Another House was at Berlikam in Friesland.

In Germany, the missionary of the Deventer House, Henry of Ahaus, founded a community at Münster in 1400, and another at Cologne in 1417 or earlier. The latter founded houses at Wiesbaden, Butzbach near Mainz, Königstein on the Taunus, and Wolf on the Moselle. There were other Houses at Osterberg near Osnabrück in 1410, at Osnabrück in 1415, at Herford in 1428, at Wesel in 1436, and at Hildesheim in 1440. Other houses were at Emmerich, Cassel, Magdeburg, Marburg, and Rostock; with lesser ones at Culm in Poland, Kempen, and Wurtemberg. In the southern Low Countries there were houses founded at Antwerp, Brussels, Cambray, Ghent, Grammont, Liège, Louvain, Mechlin, and Wynoksberg.

The Sister Houses also increased in number. The congregation at Deventer founded congregations at Essen, Cologne,

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131

In the letter written by the venerable Father William Voern, included in The Chronicle of the Canons Regular of Mount St. Agnes by Thomas à Kempis (London: Kegan, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1905) (hereafter referred to as The Chronicle), pp. 209-234, lists the following centers: Zutphen, Doesborch, Zwolle, Kampen, Utrecht, Amersfoort, Leyden, Harlem, Amsterdam, Horn, Enchusen, Pormereynde, Almelo, and Schutdorp; ibid., pp. 216 ff.



Sonsbeke, and Xanter, and reformed those at Emmerick, Calcar, and Neuss. The Brothers at Zwolle had charge of nineteen Sister Houses. Deventer had five houses; Zwolle, six; Zutphen, three; Doesburg, Kampen, Lochem, and Utrech had two each; Arnheim, Doetinchem, Gorinchem, and some other places had one each.

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We may now well consider the daily habits of those who lived the Common Life. Thomas à Kempis<sup>132</sup> describes the House at Deventer, which was typical, "wherein dwelt divers clerks, about twenty in all, living at the common charge, having a common table and expenditure, and serving God with great devotion." At first, under the influence of Gerard and Florentius, there were few priests, but later there were ordinarily<sup>133</sup> four, and twice as many clerks and novices together.<sup>134</sup> "Amongst their number," continues à Kempis, "were three lay Brothers, of whom one was the Procurator, who bought all things necessary for the Community, the second was over the kitchen, and the third mended the clothes." Over each house was a<sup>135</sup> Rector or Prior who was assisted by a vice-Rector. There

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132

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 257.

133

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 90.

134

Loc. cit.

135

Ibid., p. 91.





were other special functions such as librarian, scriptuarius, nurse, etc. Their duties were given in the Constitution of the Deventer and Zwolle Houses, and in greater detail by the Houses belonging to the "Colloquium of Münster."<sup>136</sup>

The geographical location of the Houses, as well as their financial reserve, determined in large part their mode of occupation, and the importance placed upon practical or spiritual matters. Gerard and Florentius forbade begging and so "for this reason the art of copying books was eagerly taken up by the brethren of his house in the earlier days, for this is more convenient for clerks than other work, and can be pursued more quietly, and it was introduced as their customary occupation for the common good."<sup>137</sup>

At Windesheim they produced altar books and vestments;<sup>138</sup> at Beverwijk they traded in parchment, honey, wax, and salt-fish; while at Hatten they began by depending upon agriculture and weaving, though later they founded a school of considerable reputation.<sup>139</sup> At Deventer, a certain number of Houses were allotted to copying manuscripts, and a part of that time for the benefit of the poor.<sup>140</sup> At Zwolle they occupied themselves

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<sup>136</sup> Hyma, op. cit., pp. 118 f.

<sup>137</sup> Thomas & Kempis, The Founders, p. 111.

<sup>138</sup> Ullmann, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., pp. 93 f.

<sup>140</sup> Loc. cit.



with the making of shoes, baskets, and pots, and fabricating  
<sup>141</sup>  
 woolen and linen cloth.

The Sister Houses were similar. The supervisor was called Martha, and she had an assistant Martha to help discharge her duties. A rector was provided for each House to take direction of the spiritual life. We have already seen that the Sisters were engaged, like the Brothers, in manual occupations; they were busy with spinning and weaving, and with the instruction of young girls.

There was, then, a certain degree of variation among the Houses, each developing its own character according to the situation with which it was faced. And although it was a free  
<sup>141</sup>  
 association of Houses, yet there was a basic unity. An active intercommunication was kept between the Houses. Annually the Rectors or Priors met in "Colloquiums," one at Deventer, the other at Münster, where the affairs of the communities were considered. The hierarchy within the House of Deventer proved another means of unity. Its character was more patriarchal than hierarchical, and all turned to that Prior as their spiritual father. This is accountable since the Prior  
<sup>143</sup>  
 was not elected, but represented an apostolic succession.

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<sup>141</sup>

Rev. S. Kettlewell, Thomas à Kempis and the Brothers of the Common Life (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1882), Vol. I, p. 441.

<sup>142</sup>

See Ullmann, op. cit., pp. 88 ff.

<sup>143</sup>

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 60, indicates that at first the Brothers were in question about this means of





Gerard upon his death appointed Florentius, who in turn, appointed Aemilius van Buren for his successor.

If there was freedom for the separate Houses to develop their own customs and traditions, even their own rules, there was also freedom within the Houses for the development of personal character. Only upon frequent and urgent solicitation  
144  
was a novice accepted. He had to be:

virtuous, teachable, a competent student of literature, pleasant, sound of head and breast, able to write; his previous habits should be satisfactory, and he must be adaptable to the common life. 145

After two or three months he might be allowed to stay another  
146  
ten or twelve months. During this time he was given severe treatment and not allowed to become entangled with any worldly  
147  
affairs. It was observed how well he took criticism and correction, how well he applied himself to common tasks, and if he confessed his temptations without reticence. Also he was instructed by a master in the ways and ideals of the  
148  
Brothers. After this time he was allowed admittance upon

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appointment, considering to elect the pious John of Hbaxter in place of Florentius. The custom of appointment seems to have died out. See Ullmann, op. cit., p. 89.

144

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 90.

145

Albert Hyma, The Youth of Erasmus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1930), p. 101. Hereafter referred to as Erasmus.

146

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 119.

147

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 90

148

Hyma, Erasmus, p. 102.



renouncing all property,<sup>149</sup> giving his patrimony for the common<sup>151</sup>  
<sup>150</sup> use, and this before a notary public and witnesses.

There were no solemn vows taken upon becoming one of the Brothers, though there were rules which regulated their conduct. These rules, which were broad enough for individual development, were kept in force under the restraint of love.<sup>152</sup> There was no punishment for disobedience. This freedom of action out of love for God and the Brothers distinguished their obedience to the Prior from the servile obedience of the monastic life. Thomas à Kempis says, "Of their own will they devoted themselves to God and all busied themselves in obeying their Rector or his Vicar."<sup>153</sup> An offending Brother could be dismissed, or if one chose, he could leave of his own accord,<sup>154</sup> forfeiting, however, a certain sum of money.

At first the Brothers, in their conscientious desire to follow our Lord, were severe and they gloried in self-denial. Their meals were very simple and their clothing exceedingly plain. It became customary, in this respect, to wear a gray

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149

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 119.

150

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 91.

151

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 119.

152

Ibid., p. 76.

153

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 171.

154

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 91.



cloak, coat, and breeches, without any ornamentation. A cowl covered the head, the hair of the pupils being shaved from the crown. <sup>155</sup> They were apt to be extreme in their fasts, but <sup>156</sup> later they learned that such excess did not improve the soul. <sup>157</sup> Indeed, they showed respect for their bodily welfare, having a nurse and providing time for exercise in the open air. <sup>158</sup> During their frugal meals the Brothers took turns reading devotional literature, while another was appointed to correct any improprieties at the table.

The inner life of the Brothers is revealed by the Constitution of the Houses at Deventer and Zwolle.

Our house was founded with the intention that priests and clerics might live there, supported by their own manual labor, namely, the copying of books, and the returns from certain estates; attend church with devotion, obey the prelate, wear simple clothing, preserve the canons and decrees of the saints, practice religious exercises, and lead not only irreproachable, but exemplary lives, in order that they may serve God and perchance induce others to seek salvation. Since the final end of religion consists in purity of heart, without which we shall seek perfection in vain, let it be our daily aim to purge our poisoned hearts from sin, so that in the first place we may learn to know ourselves, pass judgment upon the vices and passions of our minds, and endeavor with all our strength to eradicate them; despair temporal gain, crush selfish desires, aid others in overcoming sin, and concentrate our energy on the

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<sup>155</sup> Ullmann, op. cit., p. 91.

<sup>156</sup> Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 121.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>158</sup> Ullmann, op. cit., p. 91.





acquisition of true virtues, such as humility, love, chastity, patience, and obedience. Toward this end we must direct all our spiritual exercises: prayer, meditation, manual labor, watching, fasting,—in short, the harmonious development of our internal and external powers. 159

At the very heart, too, there was the mutual confession of sins. Once when Gerard had gone on a journey with John Brinckerinc and Florentius, Thomas à Kempis records: "After saying Compline, Gerard said, 'Let us say each one of us our daily suffrages'; and this too was a pious custom with them, that each one should tell the other of his own failings if he had seen anything worthy of blame in himself: they freely admonished one another in turn, gladly submitting themselves to censure, and acknowledging their sins with humility, asked pardon therefor; and being thus corrected in brotherly love, they went to rest." 160

Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen, writing a Treatise on the Common Life, 161 says in regard to mutual confession of sins: "One may confess one's mortal sins to a layman. And as for venial sins, one is permitted to confess them at any time.... It certainly is permissible to confess daily shortcomings to each other. For such a humble confession almost in itself

159

Quoted by Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 115 f.

160

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 31.

161

Quoted by Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 77 f. We shall examine this treatise in greater detail presently.



brings one forgiveness of the sins committed.<sup>162</sup> In the second place, this kind of confession will teach us more clearly the nature of sin, the difference between vice and virtue, and the various remedies for each vice. It is easily understood that for this kind of confessions we do not so much need a person who has the keys of authority, as one with experience in spiritual affairs, who can teach us to fight temptations and the devil's attacks....Thirdly, if one is accustomed sincerely to reveal his shortcomings, he finally becomes ashamed of having to admit the repeated yielding to the same temptation, and firmly resolves to defeat the enemy who sent that temptation. Confession also frees us more quickly from the snares of the tempter."

It was this mutual confession of daily shortcomings that the Brothers found to be so essential to their New Devotion. In an old directory of the Brothers, it is recorded that "the disclosure of our faults to one another is the badge and welfare of the community of the Common Lot....Do it away, and our institutions will perish."<sup>163</sup> This practice was observed, according to Ullmann,<sup>164</sup> even by the laymen who were followers

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162

Italics mine. Notice how this mutual confession approaches a non-sacramentalism.

163

Quoted by Ullmann, op. cit., p. 95, footnote ii.

164

Ibid., p. 95.





of the Brothers.

In the last chapter of the constitution at Deventer some of the penances to be observed are noted:

He who has been admonished or corrected and excuses himself throws himself upon his knees with his head bent on the floor and confesses his guilt....He who has offended a brother in word or deed asks forgiveness on the same day before the offended brother on bent knees, and before those also who were present when he perpetrated the offense. 165

The instruction and enlightenment of the people formed one of the most important functions of the Brothers. One means was by preaching. Although since Charlemagne the priests had been charged to preach in the native tongues, they usually spoke in Latin on topics concerned with Scholasticism. 166 A few Dominicans and Franciscans did, however, speak in the tongue understood by the people. Gerard Groote, as we have seen, 167 caused much attention by his popular preaching. Jean Gerson, who became Chancellor of Notre Dame and who defended the cause of the Brothers, became known as "le Docteur du peuple et le Docteur des petits enfants" because of his popular teaching and writing in the vernacular. It now became more popular, with the influence of those trained by the Brothers upon other

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165

Hyma, Erasmus, p. 103.

166

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 96.

167

For a brief but adequate description of Gerson, see J. E. G. De Montmorency, Thomas à Kempis: His Age and His Book (London: Methuen & Co., 1906), pp. 16 ff.



clergy, to preach in the vernacular.<sup>168</sup> These sermons were marked by their simplicity, directness, spirit, and alas! their length. Thomas à Kempis records of John Gronde that he "expounded our Lord's Passion in a most earnest manner for about six hours, allowing a short interval in the middle of his sermon to restore the strength of his hearers."<sup>169</sup> Certainly not all the Brothers' sermons were so long as that, but Gerard was known to preach on occasion for three hours.<sup>170</sup>

We have already noted Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen. Thomas à Kempis tells us that Gerard "went to foreign schools to be the better instruction,....(then) by the ordinance of God he came at last to study at Deventer, and having found the devout Brothers there he attached himself closely to Florentius."<sup>171</sup> So earnest was he for the things of God "he was seldom seen to go forth, and sought no solace outside the Monastery. Yet he held the holy writings to stand for his greatest solace." It was this Gerard who wrote the treatise Upon the Utility of Reading the Bible in the Mother Tongue. The Hebrew and Greek of the Bible had been translated into Latin. The Vulgate became, therefore, in general use in western Christendom.

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168

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 96.

169

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 174.

170

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 98.

171

Ibid., pp. 220 ff.



However, with the decline of general understanding of Latin, the people could no longer read the sacred Scriptures, nor indeed were they able to understand the Latin prayers in which they were supposed to join. Even Gerson himself was opposed<sup>172</sup> to making the Bible available to the common people in their own tongue for fear that from their ignorance of the Christian doctrines they would read it incorrectly. No less a person than Fénelon entered the argument. "I think," he said, "that much trouble has been taken in our times very unnecessarily, to prove what is incontestable, that, in the first ages of the church, the laity read the Holy Scriptures."<sup>173</sup> However, the Waldenses and the Albigenses misused the privilege, whereas "it should be given to those only, who receiving it from the hands of the church, seek for nothing in it, but the sense of the church." He concludes that "the divine books themselves are open to all, who understand Latin, or any other of the learned languages, in every Catholic country; and every one may read them, in the vulgar languages, if he first ask the advice of his Confessor, who will only instruct him in what spirit he is to read them."

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172

Kettlewell, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 297.

173

Quoted by Charles Butler, An Historical and Literary Account of the Formularies, Confessions of Faith, or Symbolic Books, of the Roman Catholic, Greek, and Principal Protestant Churches (London, 1816), pp. 142-145.





174

Gerard of Zutphen, however, in his Treatise insists that all laymen should instruct and edify themselves out of the Scriptures for in them there is a sound and simple doctrine accessible to all, for the comprehension of which no deep search or disputation is necessary, but which, on the contrary, is evident of itself to every reader without great pains or learned controversy. Originally the whole Bible was written in the languages in which it could be best understood by those for whom it was designed, and in general by all. Besides, the greatest teachers of the Church, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory, and Chrysostom, have always exhorted the laity to study the Holy Scriptures, which they would never have done had they considered it injurious or unlawful. In all, Zerbolt lists fifteen reasons to support his cause.

175

In the remarkable little book by Charles Butler, he shows that it was not the Protestants who first introduced the Bible in the vulgar tongues, but shows each Reformation translation to have been anticipated by one of the Roman Church. Of Luther's Belgic version which appeared in 1527, he says that "it had been preceded by a version of the Four Gospels, printed in 1472; and by one of the whole Bible, printed at Cologne, in 1475; at Delft, in 1477; at Gouda, in 1479; and

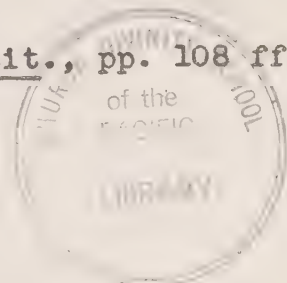
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174

Here I am dependent upon Ullmann, op. cit., pp. 108 ff., as indeed is Kettlewell.

175

Charles Butler, op. cit., pp. 152 ff.





both at Antwerp and Louvain, in 1518."<sup>176</sup> It is of great interest to note the cities in which these were printed, for in each the Brothers had Houses, although we do not know to what extent these translations and printings were the result of the Brothers' influence.<sup>177</sup>

Apart from the popular use of the Bible by John Cele, which we shall presently consider, and supplementing their preaching and making the Bible understandable to the laity,<sup>178</sup> the Brothers had another practice, that of Collations. Small gatherings would meet at the Brother-houses on Sunday afternoons and on Saints' days. Portions of Scripture, especially from the Gospels, were read. Then followed an informal exposition and practical application of the passage. Questions were allowed to be asked by the speaker to his audience. These Collations, given in the mother-tongue, were of great help to the laity who desired that they be given more often. These certainly were distinctive of the Brothers and should be remembered as one of their unique contributions. No doubt the modern form of Bible class stems from this tradition. The

<sup>176</sup>

Charles Butler, op. cit., pp. 152 f.

<sup>177</sup>

Kettlewell, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 305.

<sup>178</sup>

Kettlewell is again completely dependent upon Ullmann, op. cit., pp. 98 f., quoting from him at length, though giving him no credit!





179

Collations which were given among the Brothers themselves must have resembled in part the so-called "Faculty Meetings" which have long been a distinctive tradition at the Virginia Theological Seminary.

As for the rule the Brothers lived by, Kettlewell summarizes it as written by Gerard Groote and received by the Brothers. The Brothers were:

1. Diligently to read and search the Scriptures.
2. In the interpretation thereof to observe a great deference to the ancient doctors of the Church, such as St. Jerome, St. Augustine.
3. To labour earnestly in an endeavour to imitate the life of Christ, and to live like the primitive Christians, adopting both their principles and practices.
4. Not to mind much curious learning or refined literature, but to apply themselves to what was useful, and to study most to know the will of God.
5. Freely to protest against the abuses and corruptions of both the clergy and laity as occasion shall offer, and endeavour to win them to a better life.
6. Not to take any honorary degrees after admission into the Society, or to seek after worldly distinction.
7. Not to accept any ecclesiastical benefice, or worldly gain, but to preach the Word of God freely, and exercise a great love for souls.
8. Not to study either the canons or civil law, unless for the purpose of more easily settling differences among neighbours, and for the better maintenance of concord and charity.



9. Not to take upon them the business of friends or relatives but when mercy, piety, and justice require them to do so.

10. Contains some directions for the preservation of health and cautions about the use of medicines. 180

The day's routine went evenly, and intermittently time was<sup>181</sup> given for saying the offices of the Breviary. The constitution of the Brothers tell<sup>182</sup> that they arose at three in the morning (later five). Immediately they prepared themselves for prayer by reading certain prescribed selections. Mass was attended every day by all. The day was spent in meditation, prayer, and manual occupations. Following Compline the Brothers<sup>183</sup> went to their cells, and retired for the night at nine.

Their life was simple and devout. Always before them was the early apostolic life of holy thoughts, prayer, labor, aiding the poor, and nursing the sick. Theirs, perhaps, was the true "glorious age of faith."

180

Kettlewell, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 413 f.

181

Thomas à Kempis says (The Chronicle, pp. 49 ff.): "In this year (1412) from the Feast of Pentecost onward the Canonical Hours were sung in our church [Monastery at Winderheim] after the monastic manner." Kettlewell, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 179 ff., says that the Hours were observed earlier in the Brother House at Deventer.

182

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 116.

183

Kettlewell, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 181.



## V

At the same time, while the Brothers of the Common Life were multiplying in numbers and influence, there arose under their direction a group of monastics who adopted the Rule of Canons Regular of St. Augustine. As they were part of the same movement begun by Gerard and made like contributions as the Brothers themselves, we shall now consider their origin and growth.

From the beginning the Brothers met with opposition. We recall that it was because of resistance against the preaching of Gerard that the Brothers even began. Such preaching as they continued to do, correcting the vice of the monastic, cleric, and laity could not have continued without a rebuttal. Cause was brought against them for bringing the Scripture into popular use, for saying prayers in the vernacular, and also, for living a common life and confessing their temptations to one another and admonishing one another.

184

Monks began composing songs to mock and ridicule Gerard and his followers. The Brothers were addressed as Beghards and Lollards. A befriending city councillor, John tu Poorten, was called "Pope of the Lollards." The mendicants saw that they were a threat and so attacked them on the grounds that they were living a common life without a rule and vow





given consent to by the pope.

Of all this opposition Gerard was fully aware. Therefore upon the day of his death when no longer he would be with them to resist the attacks of the monastics, he said:

My friends, do not fear, and let not your hearts be troubled. You will not have to give up your present mode of life. In order that you may protect your temporal possessions I advise you to build a monastery, where those among you best fit for the monastic life may find shelter and perform their works in peace, while at the same time it will protect the others who prefer to remain in the world. 185

He was asked, "But which order shall we join?" "The Augustinian," he answered, "for their rules are not so harsh as those of the Carthusians and Cistercians." Thomas à Kempis is no doubt correct that "he was moved to institute this religious order chiefly by the especial love and reverence he had for that  
186  
venerable John Ruysbroeck."

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185

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 46 f.

186

Ruysbroek, it will be remembered, was forced under the same conditions to adopt a monastic rule. Although, as we shall see, Gerard did seem to have in mind earlier the founding of a monastery of Canons Regular, it is the opinion of this writer that it was not the ideal of Gerard or else he would not have directed their twofold purpose to be simply a refuge for those not able to continue the common life in the world under persecution, and secondly, as an expedient means of affording the Brothers protection against attack. Rudolph Dier (quoted by Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 82) seems to agree. He says, "For this reason did they decide to build a monastery, because they living the simple, common life, were afraid of further persecutions by rivals, and thus, if some of their numbers would be actually living in a monastery, the others would be protected by them."



Gerard had died of the plague contracted upon giving medical aid to his wealthy and pious friend, Lambert Stuerman, who subsequently gave one hundred French crowns<sup>187</sup> to the Brothers<sup>188</sup> to build a monastery according to Gerard's directions.<sup>189</sup> Several larger sums were provided as well.

The first monastery that was built was upon the property of one of the Brothers, which was situated at Windesheim just east of the Yssel and three miles southeast of Zwolle. The spot was a lonely one, having only a few willows upon it. The work of building was begun by a single man, but later five others joined him so that the monastery and chapel were consecrated the next year on October 17, 1387.<sup>190</sup> It is interesting that at the induction ceremonies of the first six Canons Regular, among them John à Kempis, they took the monastic vows, but did not give a vow of obedience to the Bishop of Utrecht<sup>191</sup> nor to any other rule than they themselves were to write.

187

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 83.

188

Kettlewell, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 146.

189

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 83.

190

"Here then they builded for their first need a small chapel, which they let consecrate in honour of Mary, the most Blessed Mother of God, and also other buildings of moderate size, and they reverently called the place, 'The Garden of the Blessed Mary,' in honour of Christ's gentle Mother." Thomas à Kempis, The Chronicle, p. 25.

191

See Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 83 f. for the founding of Windesheim.





The dress of the Canons was the same as that of the Brothers except that the Canons wore a white rochet and black cape or hood.<sup>192</sup>

The monastery was marked by its joyous character.<sup>193</sup> They began their reforms in education which we shall examine later in some detail. And they continued the collations, although with some variation. They began by singing a hymn, followed by a portion of Scripture which was read and expounded upon in the vernacular, and questions were answered. Following a short exhortation and a prayer, they sang again. As the people left, slips of paper were given to them on which were written portions of Scripture or maxims of the saints.<sup>194</sup>

In 1392 the Brothers at the Deventer and Windesheim congregations founded another monastery at Mariendaal near Arnheim.<sup>195</sup> The funds were provided by John Ketel, the cook at Deventer, and Florentius. Another monastery was built near Hoern by Gerard de Hoern and Paul de Medenblic.<sup>196</sup> The third, on Mount St. Agnes, is of special interest, for it was built

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192

Kettlewell, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 192 f.

193

Ibid., p. 194.

194

Ibid., p. 193.

195

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 85.

196

Samuel Kettlewell, Thomas à Kempis and the Brothers of the Common Life (2d ed. abr.; London: Kegan, Paul, Trench and Company, 1885), p. 195.



197

upon the site chosen by Gerard and it was where Thomas à Kempis lived.

Against great opposition by the people of Zwolle, but with the consent of the Archbishop of Utrecht, they built the monastery in 1398. Of this monastery Thomas à Kempis says:

Of any place or house that was begun in so great poverty, and yet came, in despite of divers hindrances, to so great an increase of prosperity; but Jesus our Saviour Himself began in the deepest poverty, and His lack did make rich Holy Church. This house, therefore, poor at first, unknown and hidden, did deserve in process of time to be more widely increased through the blessing of our Father in heaven....For as wealthier persons came and brought their goods into the common stock, the place whose beginning was so poor, and its outward appearance so lowly, grew to be a yet fairer vineyard of the Lord of Sabaoth....These things were done and finished in the year of our Lord 1386 on the Friday before Palm Sunday, and a year and half after the death of the aforesaid Master Gerard. 199

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197

Thomas à Kempis tells us (The Chronicle, p. 5), "When the most beloved Master was sojourning in Zwolle for the purpose of preaching the Word, some of his disciples aforementioned who dwelt together there came to him secretly and confessed that they desired to live a life further removed from that of the world....And when the next day dawned he prepared for the journey and taking with him the brothers, Wychmann, Reyner, Henry and James Wettecoep, he went with them towards the mountains of Nemel to a place that was foreordained of God, and separated from the multitude....and their wise leader saw that on the south side thereof was a level place fit for crops, and he said to them that stood by: 'Place your tabernacle at the foot of this mountain—then shall ye be able to make a little garden for your herbs and fruits on the level place toward the south. If the Lord grant me life I will be here often with you.' Having visited this place and walked about it through God's inspiration, they returned again to the City together, leaving the issue of the matter to the good pleasure of the Almighty."

198

Kettlewell, 1885 ed., op. cit., pp. 195 f.

199

Thomas à Kempis, The Chronicle, pp. 9 f.





The first thirty years of the monasteries marked their  
 200  
 greatest and deepest growth. Unfortunately I can find no  
 account of their extent in any detail. That there was any dif-  
 ference between the Brothers and the Canons is largely neglect-  
 201  
 ed by the English sources. The Chronicler records that  
 when the Lord Frederick of Blackenheim, formerly Bishop of  
 Strasburg, was made Bishop of Utrecht, "the Order of Canons  
 Regular and the devout multitude of Brothers and Sisters spread  
 far and wide, and rejoiced in their prosperity in all regions  
 that lay beneath his jurisdiction. In this year also three  
 monasteries were founded in Holland, near Amsterdam." In 1394  
 a monastery was established at Northorn and "in the year of the  
 Lord 1400 they were placed under the authority of the Chapter-  
 202  
 General of Windesheim." In 1409, after reformation under  
 William van den Berg, Bishop-elect of Paderborn, the Canons  
 Secular at Budiken became Canons Regular, "conforming to the  
 rule observed in the Monastery at Zwolle so far as the rule  
 203 204  
 there obtaining doth permit." Dr. Hyma mentions the fol-  
 lowing: Bddingen, Ludingakerke in Friesland, Sion at Beverwijn,  
 Wittenburg, Sulte, and Newark.

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 200

 Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 86.

201

 Thomas à Kempis, The Chronicle, p. 172.

202

Ibid., pp. 173 f.

203

Ibid., p. 185. See also, pp. 189 and 199.

204

 Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 142.





205

The rule of St. Augustine was also adopted by some of the Sisters. John Brinkerinck, who was as close to Gerard as anyone, instituted a needed reform in the Sister House at Deventer where they had generally neglected the principles set down by Gerard. The Sisters had begun begging alms and had neglected their manual labor. The townspeople were opposing them. The clergy objected to their reading books in the vernacular. John Brinkerinck put a stop to their growing ease, and defended the Sisters against attack by preaching in the churches. It was no wonder that they desired a monastery to protect themselves from the buffetings of the world. In June of 1400 the plans were laid under the direction of their reformer, and the site of lonely ground was obtained. The Brothers of the House of Florentius helped the Sisters to build the first wooden structures which were finished the same year. The next six years marked a rapid growth; more land was purchased, and a barn was built. They were profitable agriculturists, and maintained herds of sheep, pigs, and cows. The wooden buildings were replaced by brick ones, and came to be known as the convent of Diepenveen.

The last important step in the story of their growth is recorded by William Voern as follows:



After a short while it came to pass that three daughters were born to the House at Widesem, namely Eensteyn, the House of the Blessed Virgin, and the House of the New Light near Horn. And when in this manner the number of the monasteries had grown to four, by the advice of Florentius and the other Fathers aforementioned, they sent to the Curia at Rome in the time of Boniface the Pope, who granted them leave to gather together a General Chapter together with authority and fitting privileges and so forth; for up to this time they had agreed to remain directly under the rule of the Bishop....But when the Fathers and Brothers of these four Houses held a Chapter in their humble fashion, the Fathers of the congregations whose names are given above would come together, or at least some of them, and sit them down to deal with matters concerning not the acquiring of worldly wealth, but the conversion of souls and the maintenance of the common good. And at that time all were as it were one fold and one flock, and in very deed one body in Christ. 206

At first, there was a very close relationship between the Brothers and the Canons. Before 1400 whatever the congregation at Windesheim owned had been given by the Brothers at Deventer. 207 Indeed, their possessions were considered to be a common fund to be used by either who needed it more. 208 We have also seen how the Brothers at the House of Florentius helped to build the cloister buildings for the Canonesses at Diepenveen. Gerard's original purpose of the Canons was fulfilled when the Dominicans were strongly objecting to the Common Life. The congregation at Windesheim in 1395 wrote a

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206 Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 232 f.

207 Ibid., p. 86.

208 Ibid., p. 85. See also, p. 137.





defense for their Brothers declaring that they were virtuous men who taught no heresy, did nothing in secret, preached only in churches, and indeed, were in no way monastics. And lastly, their mode of life was approved by Gregory XI.<sup>209</sup> Later,

Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen wrote his treatise, On the Common Life.<sup>210</sup> It was an admirable, exhaustive treatment and defense of the Common Life which seems to have ended the Dominican attack. The University of Cologne and the Bishop of Utrecht had approved and encouraged the New Devotion, but the Brothers desired fuller confirmation. They received official sanction in 1413 from Cardinal Pierre d'Ailly, papal legate to the Germanic people.<sup>211</sup>

Problems, however, arose between them. For awhile the Canons became a threat, it seemed, to the existence of the Brothers, for the Brothers were increasingly leaving the Houses for the monasteries.<sup>212</sup> This problem is discussed in a letter by Florentius to John Vos, prior of Windesheim. Also among the Canons themselves there grew differences. In 1399 nearly all the Brothers at Amersfoort joined the Franciscans. The same was true at Delft.<sup>213</sup> By 1400 the majority of the Brothers,

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209

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 63 f.

210

Ibid., pp. 67 ff.

211

Ibid., p. 101.

212

Quoted in part by Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 136.

213

Ibid., p. 112.



particularly those farther removed from the Yssel valley and the influence of the Brother Houses at Deventer and Zwolle, were forced to join the third rule of St. Francis.<sup>214</sup> This caused the decline of the Brothers as a semi-monastic congregation in their own right, and caused faction among the monasteries which were sponsored by the Brothers. However, whether they continued as Brothers, Canons, or Tertiaries of St. Francis, the New Devotion as taught by Gerard and Florentius continued to flourish and have influence in the fifteenth century.

The adoption of the rule of St. Augustine was prompted by three things. It was less severe than the Carthusian rule with which Gerard was familiar, and it allowed for greater freedom of development under differing situations. St. Augustine was himself a great influence upon Gerard and his theology and was called upon frequently to defend the several positions of the Brothers. And then, Ruysbroek had established the rule at Groenendael. Kettlewell has summarized the Rule conveniently:

I. To observe the fundamental law of Love: first, towards God, then towards our neighbor, according to its just extent, and to imitate the example of the Mother Church of Jerusalem in union of heart, and in sharing with others the goods we possess.

II. To learn the lesson of Humility, according to the most perfect pattern set forth in the life of Christ, and in that of His nearest and most faithful followers; and especially in this, that the greatest among them should be as the younger, and he that is chief as he that doth serve.

III. To observe carefully the stated or canonical "hours," and times of prayer; and to prepare both body and soul for it by due retirement, meditation, and fasting.

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<sup>214</sup> Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 112.





IV. To take care that the soul and body be both fed at the same time, by a prudent appointment of some spiritual entertainment at meals, as by reading some sacred book, or by a conference on holy matters, or by singing some devout songs or canticles.

V. To take charge of the sick and infirm wherever they be found, and so far as we are capable, and to do them all the service in our power for their bodily and spiritual welfare.

VI. To be without any affectation or singularity in dress, and in all the other externals of life: and to regard above all things the acquisition of internal purity and the fashioning our lives into a conformity to the will of God.

VII. Humbly and affectionately to give and receive correction and admonition from one another, meekly to confess our faults one to another, gladly to submit ourselves to the reproof or chastisement of our Superiors, and resolutely keep up the true discipline of the Gospel.

VIII. To do all we possibly can for the general good and interest of the Community; to be diligent in our duties and callings, never to be idle, or to wander curiously about, and to be content with the distribution of the common funds, though not altogether so favorable to ourselves as might be expected.

IX. Not to neglect outward cleanliness and decency, but to look to the due discharge of outward things for the sake of the inward; and to take proper care of the body for the sake of the soul, both in health and sickness.

X. To be obedient to our Superior for God's sake, to faithfully and kindly observe our relative duties towards the other members of the Society, to be ready to ask pardon and to forgive offenses in the spirit of Christ our Lord, but not so as to weaken authority. 215

It is easy to see why this rule, if any, should be adopted by the Brothers. We now turn to the specific labors and contributions of the Brothers.





## VI

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the strict Dogmatists and Scholastics were ascending in influence, the Biblical theologians fell into disrepute.<sup>216</sup> Biblical exposition found no place in the tense philosophical air that surrounded the growing achievements of synthesizing. With the decline of Scholasticism and the embarrassing weakness of the papacy, the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw men turn with renewed interest and assurance to Holy Scripture. The result was that men began living in a simpler, more apostolic manner. So it was with the Brothers. It was the Apostolic Church which became their ideal, and the reading of and meditation upon Holy Scripture became fundamental to their spiritual lives.

The founder of the Common Life had made the study of Scripture central in his rule. "Let the root of thy study and the mirror of thy life be these," he said; "First, the Gospel of Christ, for therein is the life of Christ."<sup>217</sup>

The Bible and its Gospel, no doubt, was at the center of the Brothers' preaching. Certainly, the collations were centered about Biblical exposition. It became a guide for Christian living. Said Florentius, "We ought to raise our hearts

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Ullmann, op. cit., pp. 393 f.

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Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 62.



to heaven without ceasing, and to return again and again to Holy Scripture, and to sigh that we are so carnal and sluggish<sup>218</sup> in seeking the good that is eternal." Gerard Zerbolt, as we have seen, raised a mighty defense against the attacks upon providing Scripture to the people in the language they could read.

As early as Gerard's day, the Brothers began to make a new, corrected version of the Vulgate. "Many years did these holy Fathers labour to obtain as correct an edition of the whole Bible as they possibly could."<sup>219</sup> Having collected many manuscripts from different monasteries and dioceses, they also obtained a copy of the Vulgate by St. Jerome. With these they compared and corrected the texts, attempting to make as pure a translation as possible. Their new version was given authori-<sup>220</sup>zation and became the standard for all of their copying.

"When thou doest nothing," says the maxim of Florentius, "save that accordeth with Holy Scripture, and understandest the same according to the interpretation of the saints—not relying upon thine own interpretation—then is thy conscience

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Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 155.

219

Buschius, Chronicles of Windesheim, lib. ii, cap. viii, pp. 286-89. Quoted by Kettlewell, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 390.

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See Kettlewell, op. cit., 1882 ed., Vol. I, pp. 390 f. According to Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 155, the translation was done at Windesheim and was adopted officially by the Church at the end of the fifteenth century as the standard edition. The process of correcting the manuscripts of the Fathers was also done by the Canons.





good, and thy reason right." <sup>221</sup> This also was a principle held by Gerard. Toward the end of his life, and justifying what he had done to enliven the faith of the people, Gerard wrote a Public Confession, in which he says:

I have taught and spread abroad like seed, those doctrines and methods that are wholesome for morals, sure, undoubted, evangelical and apostolic, following the Divinely inspired Scriptures and the interpretation and meaning thereunto by the Saints and Fathers, namely: Ambrose, Gregory, Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom, Dionysius, Bernard, Bede, Isidore, Hugo and Richard: and the writings of these Fathers, together with those of other saints, I do hold and use as inspired. <sup>222</sup>

It is interesting to note the order in which Gerard urges that one read Holy Books and the relative importance he places upon each. In the Public Confession he says:

Let the root of thy study and the mirror of thy life be these: First, the Gospel of Christ, for therein is the Life of Christ. (2) The lives and discourses of the Fathers. (3) The Epistles of Paul and the other Canonical Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles. (4) Holy Books, as the meditations of Bernard and the Horologium of Anselm, Bernard on the Conscience, the Soliloquies of Augustine, and such like books. (5) The legends and devotions of the Saints, the Instructions of the Fathers on Conduct, such as the Pastoral of Gregory, the blessed Augustine on Monastic work, Gregory on Job, and so forth. (6) The Homilies of the Holy Fathers and of the Four Doctors upon the Gospels, the Interpretation of the Holy Fathers and Commentaries upon the Epistles of Paul, for these are included in the authorized readings of the Church. (7) The study of the Proverbs of Solomon, Ecclesiastes and Ecclesiasticus, for these are included in the lectionaries and authorized readings of the Church. "I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the understanding also." (8) The study and interpretation of the Psalter, for this is included in the services of the Church of the Holy Fathers. "I will

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221

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 153.

222

Ibid., pp. 52 ff.



sing with the spirit and I will sing with the understanding also." (9) The study of the Books of Moses; the historical books—Joshua, Judges, and Kings; of the Prophets and the expositions of the Fathers upon the same. 223

It is obvious that the Bible undergirded every phase of the Common Life. It provided their example, exhortation, and inspiration. All that they did and understood was in the light of the Scriptures. The inspiration for their humility was the condescension of the Incarnation. The example of the Common Life was the primitive Church. Their theology and devotion, instead of speculation, was scriptural. They were not so much interested in doctrine as in love and eternal life. In the <sup>224</sup> Imitationes, for example, there are over one thousand direct Biblical references. They were not, however, without other <sup>225</sup> notable influences. De Montmorency traces clear evidence of Aristotle, Seneca, Virgil, Plotinus, Horace, Pliny, Lucan, Scotus Erigena, Thomas Aquinas; Dante?, Pseudo-Dionysius?; Anselm, St. Bonaventura's Legenda S. Franciscia, St. Bernard, <sup>226</sup> and St. Augustine. Hyma lists the men who had influence upon Gerard. It is much the same group of Latin poets, and Greek and medieval philosophers. Aquinas, however, is lacking, but

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Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, pp. 62 f.

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See de Montmorency, op. cit., pp. 174-79.

225

Ibid., pp. 140 ff.

226

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 17.





Albert Magnus appears. Indeed, Groote was as clearly an Augustinian as any other name that might be given him.<sup>227</sup> Accordingly, he maintained that before the Fall the Lex Dei was written upon the heart of man, but in his present state his intellect is dimmed and sin continues to estrange man from the suprema ratio. However, man is not totally depraved. Within him there is a divine spark. The kingdom of heaven is within us, but also is the kingdom of evil. There are two things to be done: govern our outward conduct, and listen to the voice of God within.

The door was partly open for Pelagianism, and, with the inescapable influence of medieval monachism fostering a doctrine of meritorious justification, it was impossible for the Brothers completely to avoid the doctrine. Gerard Groote, and also<sup>228</sup> Thomas à Kempis, are guilty at least of semi-pelagianism. It remained for Luther to announce clearly the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone. In the same manner the Brothers were not free from other distinctively Roman characteristics. Thomas à Kempis practiced devotions to the Virgin Mary and St. Agnes, the patron saint of the Monastery. He records<sup>229</sup> miracles which he attributes to them. He also applied the

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Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 19 f.

228

See Ullmann, op. cit., pp. 461 ff.

229

Ibid., pp. 125 f.





scourge during the singing of Stetit Jesus.<sup>230</sup>

The Brothers, however, remained rooted in the Bible and the Church Fathers, and maintained an essentially mystical theology. Scholasticism<sup>231</sup> was spurned, and St. Thomas<sup>232</sup> was frowned upon. Neither did they speculate upon the transcend-entality of God, nor were they pantheists. They desired simply "to know God, not as he is in himself, which the Schoolman and even the philosophizing ecclesiastical Fathers aspire to do, but simply as he is in us."<sup>233</sup> On the other hand, these Brothers showed only restricted contempt for the rising Humanism which, to a degree, they fostered. True, Thomas à Kempis had said, "What will it profit you to hold deep disquisitions about the Trinity, if you want that humbleness of mind which alone is pleasing to it?"<sup>234</sup> Again Thomas says, "You are required to have faith and an untainted life, not high intelligence or deep insight into the mysteries of God."<sup>235</sup> But what the Brothers stood for was putting first things first. Therefore, Thomas must admit that we must not "blame that pious and

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<sup>230</sup>

Ullmann, op. cit., p. 128.

<sup>231</sup>

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 19.

<sup>232</sup>

Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>233</sup>

Quoted by Ullmann, op. cit., p. 135, from Soliloq.

animae.

<sup>234</sup>

Thomas à Kempis, The Imitation of Christ (New York: Modern Library, 1943), p. 130. Hereafter cited as Imitationes.

<sup>235</sup>

Ibid., IV. 18, 2.



modest investigation of truth which is always ready to receive instruction, and seeks to walk in the sound maxims of the Fathers."<sup>236</sup>

Although Gerard himself reproved the study of geometry, arithmetic, rhetoric, dialectic, grammar, songs, poetry, legal matters or astrology as of no help for good living, nonetheless "of all the sciences of the heathen, their Moral Philosophy is least to be avoided—for this is often of great use and profit both for one's own study and for teaching others. Wherefore the wiser amongst them, such as Socrates and Plato, turned all Philosophy into the consideration of moral questions."<sup>237</sup>

Florentius clearly set the principle: "Worldly knowledge is very alluring; therefore let a man beware that he be not too much attracted thereunto; let him earnestly desire to pass over to God by means of such knowledge, and not be satisfied therewith as an end in itself."<sup>238</sup> In the same way Gerard makes a sacrament out of study: "The secret of nature should not be sought out in the writings of the heathen, or in the books of our Law, the Old and New Testaments, but when they meet us therein God is to be praised and glorified for them and in them; so that the knowledge of natural laws may be of profit and be

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Imitationes, IV. 18.1.

237

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 57.

238

Ibid., p. 156.





offered as a sacrifice to God Most High by giving thank-  
offerings to Him." <sup>239</sup>

In this spirit Hebrew and Greek were studied, medieval Latin purified, the Vulgate and the Fathers corrected. In this way the Brothers contributed to the rising Humanism by training and inspiring such men as Rudolph Lange, Moritz Count of Spiegelberg, Louis Dringenberg, Antony Liber, Rudolph Agricola, <sup>240</sup> and Alexander Hegius.

What influence Ruysbroek had upon the Brothers remains a problem. Groote loved men too well to be as Ruysbroek, "a lover <sup>241</sup> of solitary nooks in forest or monastery." So, too, Thomas à Kempis said, "The true monk has no desire to contemplate the beautiful." <sup>242</sup> Rather, "Shut thy door upon thee and call to thee Jesu thy love: dwell with him in thy cell for thou shalt <sup>243</sup> not find elsewhere so great peace."

On the other hand, both Gerard and Thomas à Kempis held <sup>244</sup> Ruysbroek in highest respect, and according to Pourrat, all the Brothers read his writings. Gerard, himself, "committed

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Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 58.

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Ullmann, op. cit., p. 135.

241

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 24.

242

Quoted by Ullmann, op. cit., p. 134, footnote.

243

Thomas à Kempis, Imitationes, p. 155.

244

Pourrat, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 255.



some of Ruysbroek's sayings to writing, that they might not be forgotten." <sup>245</sup>

Of such high esteem did Thomas hold him that upon his death he wrote, "His holy and glorious doctrine was published far and wide over the land of Germany, and giveth light thereto. This was he whom Master Gerard Groote visited, together with John, a scholar from Zwolle, for he thought that his writings were worthy to be compared with those of the

<sup>246</sup> greatest doctors." Thomas à Kempis would seem to be influenced by him in the following:

Behold now I seek thee, O my God, not with my bodily senses nor by means of sensible images. I seek thee within me and beyond my reason, there where thou makest thyself manifest to my mind, O eternal truth, immeasurable goodness, incomprehensible brightness....O God, my truth and my mercy, grant that I may see without bodily shape, without imaginative species and without created light....but the light eternal, uncreated, immeasurable, ineffable, incomprehensible. <sup>247</sup>

Yet, on the whole, the Brothers remained free of German mysticism, and made their own contribution to Biblical mysticism.

The "New Devotion" which issued forth from the Brothers, like the attitude expressed by St. Bernard before them, was a conscious revolt against the Scholastics who, proposing questions, gave answer only in word and not in works or enlivened

<sup>245</sup>

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 24.

<sup>246</sup>

Ibid., The Chronicle, p. 158.

<sup>247</sup>

De elevatione mentis ad inquirendum summum bonum, ii, 399-402, quoted by Pourrat, op. cit., pp. 260 f.



faith. The Brothers were interested in a deep, loving devotion to God and His Son, and the enlivening of the Holy Ghost in their lives. The New Devotion was expressed largely in maxims of spiritual counsel and advice, without thought to system or logical argument.<sup>248</sup> Beyond the use of the commonly observed monastic Hours, Groote desired that the Brothers first prepare themselves by reading certain prescribed selections. He attended Mass every day and made his communion as frequently as possible.<sup>249</sup> God, he taught, is the "summum bonum" with whom we must seek spiritual communion, for if we have Him, we have all goodness, and that which is divine in us shall be sustained and nourished. He would withdraw from the work at hand and surrender himself wholly to God, saying, "Here I am Lord; teach me to do thy will, make mine conform to thine."<sup>250</sup> This conformity of wills meets in love. "Try to love," he would say, "for in loving you shall find the kingdom of heaven, you will enjoy righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. Without these three gifts all outward show of piety, such as fasting, and mortification of the flesh, will be of no avail."<sup>251</sup> This great love was not to be found in the cell,

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E.g., The Imitationes, the Sayings of Master Florentius, the raptaria of John Vos de Huesden. etc.

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Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 21.

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Loc. cit.

251

Quoted by Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 22.





but in work among men. And "when Groote felt the force of love in his heart," says Thomas à Kempis,<sup>252</sup> "his soul would sing with joy, and his spirit, as a flame, was borne upward to God."

Within the walls of Windesheim, where there was not the contact with the outer world as Gerard had envisioned, the Canons would begin their labors each day with prayer. When it was possible, during work they would chant psalms, and then they would observe silence for meditation upon the sacred truths of Holy Scripture.<sup>253</sup> In his Devout Exercises, Lubert Berner says in regard to the saying of psalms, "When thou prayest have no thought save of God and thy Psalmody, considering that He seeth thee. Give up thy will freely and wholly to Him, and utterly put aside, so far as thou art able, all unnecessary and empty thoughts. Strive so to behave thyself as if thou wert standing alone in the Presence of God, the Blessed Virgin and all the saints; to Them show thy necessities and the wounds of thy soul."<sup>254</sup>

<sup>255</sup> Pourrat traces the rising devotion to the Blessed Sacrament in the Middle Ages. This new devotion was keenly present

<sup>252</sup>

Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, p. 31. Quoted here, however, from Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 22, where he seems to have destroyed the meaning of his source, but nonetheless is consistent with Gerard.

<sup>253</sup>

Kettlewell, op. cit., 1882 ed., Vol. I, p. 389.

<sup>254</sup>

Excerpts are quoted by Thomas à Kempis in his Life of Lubert Berner, The Founders, pp. 206 ff.

<sup>255</sup>

Pourrat, op. cit., Vol. II, pp. 322-328.



among the Brothers. The Fourth Book of the Imitationes is the greatest expression of this devotion. But the Brothers taught not only the proper attitude in which the Communion is to be made, but also the necessary preparation before Communion.

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Godfried, rector of the Brother House at Deventer, said:

"Nothing retards our spiritual progress so much as our not being fit for receiving the Holy supper, since we have not properly prepared ourselves for it."

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Pourrat maintains that though the Franciscans, and St. Bonaventura in particular, had begun to stress the importance of meditation, it remained for the Brothers to systematize it.

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Gerard had recommended that the Brothers meditate upon the passion of Christ, and in the Constitution of the Brother Houses at Deventer and Zwolle it was stated:

Whereas the fear of the Lord is necessary to those who wish to overcome evil, it is expedient for each of us to meditate on such subjects as induce man to fear the Lord, like sin, death, judgment, and hell. But lest continued fear might engender dejection and despair, we shall have to add hopeful subject matter for meditation, such as the kingdom of heaven, the blessings of God, the life of Christ, and his passion. These subjects we shall arrange in such a way that on Saturdays we shall meditate upon sin, Sundays on the kingdom of heaven, Mondays on

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Quoted in Hyma, Erasmus, p. 96.

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Pourrat, op. cit., pp. 13 ff. Pourrat follows P. Watri-gant, the definitive scholar on the history of meditation.

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However, St. Bernard and John van Ruysbroek are not to be disregarded in this respect. And since both of them were held in such respect by the Brothers as a whole, no doubt they made perceptible influence upon their method of meditation.





death, Tuesdays on the blessings of God, Wednesdays on the final judgment, Thursdays on the pains of hell, and Fridays on the passion of Christ. 259

The history of the New Devotion as a means of systematic meditation began with Gregory the Great. "Every convert had a beginning, a middle, and a perfection," he said; "in the first there is sweetness to allure him; in the second bitterness to exercise him; and in the third fulness of perfection to confirm him." 260 St. Bonaventura had spoken of the three spiritual ways: the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive. Florentius followed St. Bonaventura closely, and Gerard Zerbolt speaks of meditation as reforming the three powers of the soul: 261 the understanding, the memory, and the will.

The Canons at Windesheim found difficulty in their meditations, however. Their minds wandered and they lacked spiritual discipline. Therefore, John Wessel Gansfort, who lived with the Brothers in Zwolle, was asked to formulate a systematic means of meditation. The result was his Scala meditatoria which consisted of three parts:

preparatory steps (gradus preparatorii)—i.e., driving away thoughts unconnected with the subject of the meditation and the retention of such as are best suited to it; ascending steps (gradus processorii)—i.e., for the orderly training of the mind, the judgement, and the

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259

Quoted by Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 116.

260

Quoted by Kettlewell, op. cit., 1882 ed., Vol. II, p. 37.

261

See Pourrat, op. cit., Vol. III, pp. 12 ff.



will; the final steps (gradus terminatorii), which sum up the whole of the meditation by entrusting to God the generous desires kindled in the course of the whole exercise. Each part included a somewhat large number of acts to be made, and this renders the method complicated and even wearisome if carried out in all its details. 262

The New Devotion was spread not only among the Brothers and Canons, but also among the laity, clergy, and other monasteries. The work of reforming monasteries other than their own became a principal contribution of the Brothers and their Canons. John Mauburnus and a few others at Mount St. Agnes were asked to bring the New Devotion to the Abbey of the Canons Regular of Livry, near Paris. There he wrote his Spiritual Rosary, quoting the Scala meditatoria of Gansfort, commenting upon it, and enlarging the theory of meditation. As early as 1393, congregations were joining themselves to Windesheim, and later, whole incorporated chapters—viz., the seven monasteries of the Groenendael chapter in 1413. Not only were the Low Lands influenced, but the New Devotion spread over Germany and into France. New monasteries were formed and old ones reformed. The names of these reformers are many, but principally, Henry Loeder, John Busch, John Brinkerinck, and John Standonck, are to be remembered. Not only were the Augustinian monasteries reformed, but the Sisters promoted reforms as well. The New Devotion called the Canons into Benedictine, Cistercian, and





Premonstratensian monasteries. John Busch was so successful in the many monasteries he visited that Pope Nicholas V appointed him as supervisor of all the Augustinian Canons Regular in Saxony, Meissen, and Thuringia. <sup>263</sup>

The introduction of the New Devotion in monasteries was not the only reforming activity of the Brothers, nor was it the only manner in which their influence was felt in Europe, for they were also engaged in the reform of education. John Cele, who had visited blessed John van Ruysbroek with Master Gerard Groote, and like the latter had entered the same Carthusian monastery only to return again into the world, set about the reform of the school at Zwolle. <sup>264</sup> Hyma claims for Cele that "he became the founder and originator of what we now call the secondary schools, and it was his school that served as model for those of Dringenberg, Hegius, Murmellius. Melanchthon, Sturm, Calvin, the Jesuits, and all their followers." Cele did introduce several innovations. He reduced the curriculum according to the principle of general usefulness. Of what purpose was it to teach Canon Law and medicine to the average pupil? On the other hand, the Bible and the Fathers are needful for all. In the morning he would read from the Epistles, in

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See Hyma, Christian Renaissance, Chap. IV, for the story of monastic reforms.

264

Ibid., p. 92. For the following concerning Cele, I am indebted to Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 92-98.





the afternoon from the Gospels, and in the evening from some other books. He would also read the plainest and most helpful sections so that the pupils could write them down in their rapiaria, or copy books, and then they would memorize them. Cele, however, did not totally abandon the general curriculum in vogue. Certain topics merely were not taught in general, but were taken by those students who were in need of the topic. His school was divided into eight classes, an experiment begun for the first time by Cele. And the two highest classes were taught by specialists.

Cele did not believe in punishment of any kind. Harsh punishment does not bring better discipline, he reasoned, but love and understanding of the child will. Therefore he first became acquainted with his pupils and gave them his sympathy and love.

In all this we can see the influence of Gerard. It was the Brothers who housed the twelve hundred pupils at Zwolle, and who co-operated with Cele in the whole education of his pupils. Cele, too, loved books and established a library at the Church of St. Michael at Zwolle where anyone might borrow them.

John Cele, as noted above, had many notable successors. The Brothers on the whole merely co-operated with the schools where they found them. The Houses at Deventer, Zwolle, and Münster did not have their own schools, but were clearly affil-



iated with the existing ones in the same towns. These schools surpassed even the famous schools at Cologne, Trier, Strass-  
 265 burg, and Mainz. The Brothers at first did little teaching themselves, as a matter of fact, but by 1475 the printing press had made them useless as copyists; they therefore turned to teaching. Various Houses established their own schools, principally at Doesburg, Ghent, Gouda, Grammont, Groningen, 's-Hertogenbosch, Liège, Magdeburg, Nijmegen, Rostoch, and Utrecht. It was Cele's reform which was followed in all these schools and even within schools in no way affiliated with the Brothers. And no small part of that reform was the spirit of Gerard.

We turn lastly to the literary products of the Brothers. Although the Brothers applied themselves principally to the copying of manuscripts, several of them became authors of original works, usually as circumstances necessitated it. These writings, as we shall discover, had no little effect in Europe. We have already taken notice of several of their products. Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen felt called upon, it will be remembered, to defend the use of prayers, Scripture, and the writings of the Fathers in the vernacular. The treatise was called On the Common Life. It is here that he defends the general principles of the Common Life on Canonical grounds and appeals





to Scripture and the Fathers.<sup>266</sup> Two other chapters are to be noted: "Upon the utility of reading the Bible in the mother tongue," and "Of prayer in the mother tongue."<sup>267</sup> Gerard also wrote two theological works, Spiritual Ascensions, and Reformation of the Faculties of the Soul.<sup>268</sup> His Spiritual Ascensions was based upon the Treatise on Spiritual Exercises by Florentius Radewin. It is here that he states the three falls of man: the fall from innocence, the fall into sin, and the fall into mortal sins. There are, therefore, three ascents by reforming: the intellect, the will, and the memory—which are the three faculties of the soul.

<sup>269</sup> Florentius himself was not an author of any great note. His two works, Omnes inquit artes, a collection of favorite excerpts, and his Treatise on Spiritual Exercises, which contain also excerpts from St. Bonaventura, Cassianus, and others, point simply along the road to the kingdom of God. It is a way of love, purity of heart, prayer, discipline, and above all, grace.<sup>270</sup> Gerard Groote, too, had made a collection of Moral Sayings. "Gerard, moreover," recounts Thomas à Kempis, "wrote profitable

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<sup>266</sup> See Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 67 ff.

<sup>267</sup> Ullmann, op. cit., pp. 108 ff.

<sup>268</sup> Hyma, op. cit., pp. 79 ff.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., pp. 54 ff.

<sup>270</sup> Ullmann, op. cit., p. 79.



treatises, and many letters to divers persons....He translated two books of John Ruysbroek from the Teutonic into the Latin tongue, and these are entitled: 'Ecce Sponsus' and 'De gradibus amoris.' Likewise he translated 'The Hours of the Blessed Virgin,' and certain of the Hours from the Latin into the Teutonic tongue."<sup>271</sup> Also to John van Ruysbroek "did Gerard address certain friendly letters, and John, who loved the Master's words with all his heart, did collect the whole number of his epistles."<sup>272</sup>

The Canons Regular at Windesheim and Mount St. Agnes produced works which have had lasting influence. The two outstanding writers at Windesheim were Henry de Mande and Gerlac Peters (or Gerlacus Petri). Gerlac, in his Soliloquium cujusdam regularis (or Ignitum cum Deo soliloquium),<sup>273</sup> addresses his soul or God in the same fashion as the Imitationes of à Kempis. Two other works by Gerlac are Breviloquium de accidentiis exterioribus and De libertate spiritus. Another Canon at Windesheim was Henry de Mande who was converted by Gerard and entered the monastery in 1392. He wrote several works in German and a soliloquy to the soul in which he frequently quotes the Imitationes.

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<sup>271</sup> Thomas à Kempis, The Chronicle, pp. 161 f.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., pp. 195 f.

<sup>273</sup> Pourrat, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 256.



At Mount St. Agnes was John Mauburnus (or Mombaer), <sup>274</sup> who wrote the significant Spiritual Rosary already noticed above in connection with the famous Scala meditatoria of Gansfort. Garcia of Cisneros, nephew of Cardinal Ximenes of Cisneros, collected many of the Brothers' writings, and printed some <sup>275</sup> some time after 1499. Making use of St. Bonaventura, Gerson, and the New Devotion, <sup>276</sup> primarily the Rosary of Mombaer and the writings of Gerard Zerbolt, <sup>277</sup> he compiled his Ejercitatorio. It was this work and Zerbolt's own works which were to form <sup>278</sup> the basis of Ignatius Loyola's Spiritual Exercises.

From Mount St. Agnes came also the many writings of Thomas à Kempis. Whether or not the Imitationes was his composition or compilation, it rapidly spread over Christendom, becoming the greatest of all Christian literature, standing alone beside the Holy Scripture.

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<sup>274</sup> Pourrat, op. cit., Vol. III, pp. 15 f.

<sup>275</sup> My source is lost.

<sup>276</sup> Pourrat, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 17.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., Vol. II, p. 262.

<sup>278</sup> Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 273.





## VII

The far-reaching consequences of that first small group gathered about Master Gerard were felt not only in the increasing use of the vernacular, in education and monastic reform, in the spread of the New Devotion, and the influence of the Imitationes. We shall here only briefly indicate the relationship of the Brothers to four Continental thinkers: John Wessel Gansfort, Martin Luther, Erasmus, and Ignatius Loyola.

John Wessel Gansfort was born of a baker's family in 1419<sup>279</sup> or 1420. He was afforded an education by his matron, Ottilia or Oda Clantes, who sent him with her only son to Gröningen and later to Zwolle. There he distinguished himself as a scholar and became a lector to the third class. He instructed in the dormitory from 1440 to 1449. It was while he was at Zwolle that Gansfort began to visit the sixty-year-old Thomas à Kempis at the nearby monastery at Mount St. Agnes. He left the Brothers in 1449 and was given his B.A. at the University of Cologne in 1450, and his M.A. two years later. For the next eight years he was professor at the University of Cologne and Heidelberg, and spent some time again with the Brothers in Zwolle. His life thereafter was spent in nomadic fashion; Paris, however, was the center of his travels. Paris

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I am totally reliant upon Ullmann, op. cit., Book IV, and Hyma, Christian Renaissance, Chap. VI, for this sketch of Gansfort.



was the home of the Occamists, and was friendly to Ailly and Gerson, Hugo of St. Victor, Gerard Zerbolt, and Thomas à Kempis.

After a long and brilliant career, Gansfort returned at the suggestion of his patron, David of Burgundy, Bishop of Utrecht, to the Lowlands and the Brothers. He lived with the Canons at Mount St. Agnes and Zwolle, and at the monastery Adwerd in Friesland, and the nunnery at Gröningen. It was at this time that Gansfort did most of his writing. He died on October 4, 1489, and was buried in the nunnery at Gröningen.

Shortly after his return to Zwolle, he wrote his treatise, On the Sacrament of Penance. "I do not believe," he said, "that Peter possessed the right either to loose whomsoever he pleased from the bond of Satan or to bind him therewith. For just as there is but one that baptizes in the Holy Spirit, so there is one that binds and looses,—binds, I say, and looses with authority."<sup>280</sup> "The pope has no more power in reconciling souls to God than in alienating them from him. Indeed in excommunicating he has no power except, through ecclesiastical court, publicly to exclude a person from the privileges of the Church. Similarly, in indulgences he can only free a person from the bond of the canons and from censure."<sup>281</sup> He continues to say that Absolution by the priest is permissible "when it can be

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Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 213 f.

281

Ibid., p. 215.





done to advantage, that is, so that those who are quickened and see may have a wider vision." This would agree with the non-sacramental confession urged by Groote and the Brothers.

Like the practice instituted by the Brothers, Gansfort made rapiaria or farrago. These are filled with excerpts from St. Augustine and St. Bernard. Like the Brothers, he studied Hebrew and Greek as well as Latin, and read many of the same ancient and contemporary writers.<sup>282</sup> He preferred Plato before Aristotle. Not long after he died, it was said, "Since Wessel greatly admires the teaching of Plato as being more divine and nearer to Christianity, and at times inveighed against Aristotle more sharply than the tender ears of Scholastic doctors could bear, some called him 'Master of contradictions.'<sup>283</sup>"

Gansfort taught a similar theology to that of Gerard. As for our justification he says: "Faith is not the cause of our justification, but its proof....good works nourish and strengthen our faith, but do not make it alive....For only Christ and the Spirit quicken us, and Christ's sacrifice sanctifies us, and we are more strongly bound to this life by the stronger bond of our faith. But nothing strengthens this bond more than love."<sup>284</sup> Again we see that the theology of

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See Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 206, for the authors he quotes.

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Quoted by Hyma, ibid., p. 208.

284

Ibid., p. 212.



the New Devotion falls short of the "justification by faith alone"; rather, the emphasis is upon love than upon faith. The doctrine of predestination, however, becomes clear in Gansfort. "It is not our faith—whether it be in Christ or in God who delivered Christ over to be a sacrifice—nor is it the sacrifice of Christ that constitutes our righteousness; but it is the purpose of God, who accepteth the sacrifice of Christ, and who through Christ accepteth the sacrifice of Christians."<sup>285</sup>

In 1552 Luther read some of Gansfort, and declared: "If I had read his works earlier, my enemies might think that Luther had absorbed everything from Wessel: his spirit is so in accord with mine." This is not surprising, for both Luther and Gansfort were educated by the Brothers. In 1497 the Brothers established a school in Magdeburg where Luther<sup>286</sup> lived. No doubt Luther, after his one year at the school, continued his contacts with the Brothers, for we know that he had read the Spiritual Exercises of Gerard Zerbolt, the Rosary of John Mombaer, and the Imitationes of Thomas à Kempis by<sup>287</sup> 1522. Probably he had read them even before this date. Luther, like Gansfort, was heir to the tradition of Gerard, Florentius, and Zerbolt. It is the latter who seems to have

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285

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 212.

286

Quoted by Hyma, ibid., p. 191.

287

Ibid., p. 220.





genuinely influenced Luther. Said Zerbolt (as did Florentius),

We have been contaminated by original sin, and wounded in all the powers and faculties of the soul. For through the loss of original justice as a result of our fall and the just judgment of God, these powers and feelings, having fallen from their proper status, have become deranged and diminished, though not completely destroyed....Christ through his precious death does indeed redeem us from our original sin....though he does not at once restore us to our original righteousness, nor does he reform the faculties of our soul, but left those to be reformed by us through saintly exercise. 288

Luther, in his Lecture on the Epistle to the Romans, agrees that man indeed has fallen low, and even after Christ is accepted by faith, "sin has remained behind in spiritually minded persons as an exercise in the life of grace, in order to humble pride, and restrain boldness." 289

Like the Brothers, Luther had little to do with Scholasticism and Aquinas. He, too, decried the abuses of the clergy. 290 Nonetheless, there is a significant difference between Luther and the Brothers. He later made his clear, emphatic statement of "justification by faith alone," whereas the Brothers continued to teach love as their central doctrine. Secondly, there was an entirely different spirit, perhaps due to this basic disagreement, for the Brothers insisted upon

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288

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 318.

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Ibid., p. 319.

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Ibid., p. 320.





brotherly love and moderation, whereas the Lutherans organized a persecuting resistance against Rome. Erasmus said, "Wessel and Luther have much in common, but how much more modest and like Christ does he propagate his teachings than those Lutherans<sup>291</sup> at Strasburg!"

Erasmus, too, was influenced to an extent by the Brothers.<sup>292</sup> He was educated by them, spending nine years at Deventer, and then at 's-Hertogenbosch.<sup>293</sup> It was the Brothers who inspired him to study the Bible and the Fathers in the original tongues, to admire Seneca's ethics above Cicero's rhetoric, to study St. Paul, St. Augustine, and St. Jerome, and<sup>294</sup> above all, the primary commandment of our Lord, love. It is not surprising, then, to have Erasmus say in 1528 these words which reflect so clearly the New Devotion:

Some persons emphasize the confessional too much, others on the contrary want to do away with it altogether, though there may be a mean between the two extremes. Likewise certain persons have carried the Mass so far that it almost becomes with unlearned and sordid priests, or rather sacrificers, a source of profit and ground of confidence for evil-living men; others again would totally abrogate it. But here, too, there is room for moderation whereby we might have a more holy

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Quoted by Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 329.

292

Hyma has written a thesis, The Youth of Erasmus, proving the debt Erasmus owed to the Brothers. His case is, perhaps, overstated.

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Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 226.

294

See Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 228 f.



and pure Mass, and yet avoid having none at all. In a similar way certain persons in their extreme and superstitious worship of spirit almost obscure the worship of Christ. Some persons strive utterly to overthrow all the status of the monks; others on the contrary lay too much emphasis on their constitutions, ceremonies, titles, and kinds of vesture. In these and all other matters it might be brought about by a prudent moderation that we might hold dogma of faith more certainly and better; that the confession might be improved and made less irksome; the Mass might be more sacred and more venerated; we might have priests and monks, if fewer in number, yet certainly better....That would be more easy to accomplish if private reasonings were laid aside and we were all to look to one great objective, that is, the glory of Christ. 295

The last interesting figure we shall consider in relation-  
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 ship to the Brothers is Ignatius Loyola. Loyola experienced in the monastery at Manresa much the same struggle with sin and the future judgment and punishment that Luther had at Erfurt. At the same time Loyola began to study the Life of Christ by Ludolph of Saxony, the Flower of the Saints, Garcia of Cisneros' Spiritual Exercises (which we noted was based upon Zerbolt), and the Imitationes. The latter became one of his favorite books, standing beside the Gospels themselves. After a year at Manresa, Loyola went to Paris where between 1528 and 1535 he attended the reformed school at Montaigu under Standonck's direction. Here he used Zerbolt's Spiritual Ascensions, and most likely whatever else of the Brothers he

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Quoted by Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 327 f.

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Again I am entirely indebted to Hyma, ibid., pp. 268 ff.





could read. At last he began the first Latin version of his own Spiritual Exercises. The Exercises are patterned unmistakably after Ludolph's Life, but equally after Zerbolt and Mombaer, and the Imitationes.

Again the fruits of the New Devotion are to be found in Loyola's practical mysticism; the putting away of vices and the cultivation of virtues, the burning desire to love God more and more, the moderate asceticism; and even in smaller things, education based upon Christian ideals, scholarship rated less than character, yet a desire for thorough education, and proper and corrected editions of the Bible and the Fathers, and even the use of Gerard's rapiaria. The purpose of the Jesuits was much akin to that of the Brothers. There is even a clear relationship between Luther and Loyola. Both were children of the New Devotion:

If Luther praised the Brethren of the Common Life, the early Jesuits did exactly the same thing, and for nearly the same reasons. The brethren were reformers; so were Luther and Loyola. The brethren wanted to win souls for Christ, and to imitate him, so also did Luther and Loyola, wherefore the latter's disciples called themselves Jesuits. The Brethren of the Common Life labored hard between 1500 and 1520 to improve elementary and secondary education; after 1550 the Jesuits did also. Hence Miraeus, a Belgian Jesuit, wrote: 'For does not the Society of Jesus, in imitation of the brethren, open schools throughout the whole world?' Those writers who cling to the old belief that Loyola's new brotherhood was founded primarily to counteract the rising wave of Protestantism, are greatly mistaken, for both the Reformation on its religious side and the Counter-Reformation owed their origins in part to the same religious movement: the 'New Devotion,' or Christian Renaissance. 297



## VIII

To what extent may the New Devotion be termed the Christian Renaissance? The Renaissance connotes enlightenment and new searching for Truth as a prize worth all labor and all sacrifice. And within the sphere of Christianity, such a Renaissance would mean the dedication of that new-found Truth to the glory of God, and a rebirth of Christianity. The New Devotion was such a Renaissance.

Firstly, it was an enlightenment. Gerard was not ignorant of his times. The very center of his preaching was the castigation of the clergy and the mendicant monks who were guilty of the most obvious worldliness and corruption. Because he so spoke against them, he was forced into a silent movement of reform. He was enlightened, too, concerning the papacy. Writing to a friend, William de Salvarvillâ, Gerard said:

The decadence of the Church is visible in everything. The ruin of the whole body of the Church has been a long time threatened....We suffer especially in the chief—the Pope; for following the doctrine of physicians, the disorders of the head are the symptom of a grave malady, and one effect is a fever which ravages the whole organism. We are like inexperienced physicians; we see the actual signs of the evil without having regard to the older symptoms, which are not less important. Thus we lean entirely on one side, whilst the present suffering is not the principal cause of the decline. I hold indisputably that the luminaries of the Church must be overthrown because of the cupidity and luxury of the Ecclesiastics. This schism will not be cured without leaving a large scar....and I, who desire the return of the unity of the Church, I wish that the two rival popes were in heaven to sing the Gloria in Excelsis; and that a veritable Eliakim would descend





upon earth, who would not be of this same race of vipers. But this present hour is the hour of darkness. May God deliver us from the evil! Amen. 298

Secondly, the New Devotion was a conscious turn from medieval philosophy. It is true that they showed some preferences, but they were living thoroughly in their own day. But the major trend in the New Devotion was a rejection of all useless debate and a turn toward the Holy Scripture, the early Church Fathers, and the Greek and the Latin philosophers whom the Fathers had read. While they did not extol knowledge for itself, neither did they spurn it, but rather they dedicated it in a sacramental fashion to God, making use of learning so as better to understand the ancients. They began study of Greek and Hebrew, and purified medieval Latin. Their libraries and schools became centers of learning so that there was a general benefit to society. Tradesmen began to speak Latin, merchants began to speak Greek, and girls sang Latin songs. Their schools became as famous as the ones in Cologne and Trier. Thousands of students came from great distances to be educated by the Brothers, then returned to their homes carrying with them the new learning. It is not surprising that such men as Erasmus, Gansfort, and Rudolph Agricola were educated by

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Quoted by Kettlewell, op. cit., 1882 ed., Vol. I, pp. 189 f.

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Ullmann, op. cit., p. 101.

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Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 341.





the Brothers and given their inspiration and earnest quest after a new learning.

And thirdly, the New Devotion was a rebirth of Christianity. The hard shell of ecclesiasticism had cracked; the two halves, Avignon and Rome, opened a yawning gap of hollow piety. The spiritual superstructure of Christianity had been replaced by worldliness and corrupt political ideology. The world and the Church were in great need of a spiritual rebirth, a new fundamental devotion, and a turning to simpler, apostolic Christianity. Scholasticism had stressed dogma, but it was love that the world needed; a new devotion to God. The ailing world knew its lack; reform was accomplished in monasteries, and the whole western world opened and read Of the Imitation of Christ.

The Christian Renaissance would seem to have a close relationship to the rising Humanism and the coming Protestantism. The New Devotion did foster Humanism, but there is a basic difference between the two movements. The New Devotion sprung from a deep and ever-abiding love of God, and therefore of Truth. Whatever of Truth was to be found, it was evaluated in the light of that true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. Humanism followed the destruction of the medieval unity and the rise of Individualism. The trinity of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness was broken. Truth could be sought after for its own sake, and apart from God. This was



the "enlightenment" which could not comprehend the true Light that shineth in the darkness of the Dark Ages. Humanism would from that time to now carry its own torch searching for its truth like the pitiful Demosthenes, with lantern held high, searching for an honest man.

As for the New Devotion and the Reformation, no doubt Luther was encouraged to find some one else who had said much the same thing as he had; no doubt the New Devotion took hold of the hearts of Protestants as it took hold of the Jesuits. The spirit of the New Devotion, as the quickening of piety, became lost, however, in the rationalism of the Protestants and their quarrels with the Church. Of the simplicity and directness of the Common Life, what remained and was distorted by the Protestants of the Lowlands and Switzerland, <sup>301</sup> was the persecution of Romans and Lutherans, and the whitewashing of their churches. On the other hand, the Jesuits fed upon Zerbolt and à Kempis. In their desire to imitate Christ, they called themselves after His holy name.

More clearly is the New Devotion the parent of the Counter-Reformation than the Reformation. If Bucer and Calvin showed any resemblance to Gansfort, <sup>302</sup> so did St. Francis Xavier. If

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301

Hyma, Christian Renaissance, pp. 342 f.

302

Ibid., pp. 287 f.





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Zwingli owed anything to Gansfort and Erasmus for his doctrine of the real absence, the Fourth Book of the Imitationes is our greatest expression of belief in the real Presence. If Scholasticism had stressed dogma, Luther stressed faith; both were concerned with the content of doctrine. Calvinism was the new Scholasticism. Scholasticism in any form was scorned by the Brothers; so much the greater scorn would they have for a new faith apart from orthodoxy and born of the new Individualism. The New Devotion was an enlivening of the old faith with Christian love and practical mysticism, and an eager return to the orthodoxy of the Church Fathers. Whatever Protestantism found of value in the Christian Renaissance they distorted, and tragically they left behind some of the real worth which had to be rediscovered by other generations. Gerard believed in the Church; he desired "the return of unity of the Church,"  
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 and could never have tolerated non-conformity. It was he who said, "Salvo Semper iudicio Sacrosanctae Romanae ecclesiae  
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 cui humillime undique et ubique me submitto."

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Hyma, Christian Renaissance, p. 342.

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See Hyma, ibid., pp. 30 f., for Gerard's attacks upon heretics and the schismatic Free Spirits.

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Thomas à Kempis, The Founders, Introduction, p. xxxix.



## IX

For nearly two centuries the Brothers exerted influence wherever they went, and beyond. They were strongest between the earlier years of 1425 to 1451 when the greatest number of congregations were established. They received favorable response from Popes Martin V, Eugene IV, and Pius II, and the aid of the Archbishop of Utrecht, and their own pupil, Cardinal Nicolaus of Cusa.<sup>306</sup> Notwithstanding, their decline in the early sixteenth century was rapid and complete. The decline of the Christian Renaissance is not wholly inexplicable. Indeed, it was inevitable by the very nature of the Common Life, which unleashed several new forces in medieval life, and the historical situation, both within the Church and without.

Several of the contributions of the Christian Renaissance led directly to the rising Individualism. Essentials to the Common Life was its mystical New Devotion. Mysticism, apart from whatever else it is, is a doctrine of personal religion. Within the Church it spiritualizes the formalism; without the Church it tends to destroy externalism. In both cases mysticism is a personal return into the summum bonum, and the spiritual ascension of the individual soul. The mysticism of the Brothers was clearly within the Church, but the New Devotion was adopted by others than the Brothers. Loyola and



Luther were both devoted to the Imitationes; in the one instance it remained in the Church to fortify the sacramental and ecclesiastical systems, in the other instance it only contributed to the Individualism and the destruction of the priesthood (Lutheranism) and the sacramental idea (Zwinglianism).

In a second manner the Christian Renaissance contributed to the sixteenth century Individualism. So long as Latin remained the single ecclesiastical as well as the scholastic and commercial language, the unification of the Holy Roman Empire was the more certain. Although the Brothers succeeded in purifying medieval Latin, and aided in educating people in the use of it, they also encouraged the use of the vernacular. A nation, once it has found its own tongue, begins to examine its own heritage and lustily to sing of its own glories. The use of the vernacular tongues contributed in no small measure to the rising Nationalism and the rights of individuals as well as of states.

Destruction of the medieval unity had already begun; the Brothers unmindfully only contributed to the fraction. Their methods of education within the unity of all of life were sound. All of their learning was centered about the knowledge and love of God and to His glory. But the religious restrictions of the Christian Renaissance would never fetter the Renaissance of Individualism. All learning was thrown open to examination.





The past was examined apart from theology, and the contented realization that all truth was already known was shattered by discovery and experimentation. The rising European Renaissance overflowed the less exciting and restricted Christian Renaissance. With the invention of the printing press the labors of the Brother-copyists ceased to be in demand. They therefore turned both to teaching and printing.<sup>307</sup> Their teaching was soon out of vogue, and their printing was insignificant.

Not only the Renaissance overtook the Common Life, but the Reformation did likewise. Standing part way between the opposing forces of the Reformation, and harassed as they were, the Brothers were compelled to take sides in the issue. Lutheranism offered them little that they desired that the Church did not offer. Furthermore, Lutheranism was becoming persecutory in its advance. It is, however, to the credit of Luther that he offered them his protection. His most significant defense for them—for he issued many over a period of years—was his letter to the Burgomaster and council of Herford in Westphalia who had proposed to abolish the Common Life. "Inasmuch," he said, "as the Brothers and Sisters were the first to

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307

Their first press was established probably by 1468 at Mergenthal near Geissenheim. Also they had presses at 's-Herzogenbusch, Gouda, Louvain, Rostock, and Convent-Hun near Schoohoven. Ullmann, op. cit., p. 173.



begin the Gospel among you, lead a creditable life, have a decent and well-behaved congregation, and at the same time faithfully teach and hold the pure word, may I affectionately entreat your worship not to permit any dispeace or molestation to befall them, on account of their still wearing the religious dress, and observing old and laudable usages not contrary to the Gospel. For such monasteries and Brother-houses please me beyond measure. Would to God that all monastic institutions were like them! Clergymen, cities, and countries, would then be better served, and more prosperous than they now are." <sup>308</sup>

With such friendliness on the part of the embittered Lutherans towards the Brothers, it is no wonder that the Papal party might have taken a second look at the Common Life. The Jesuits, who had become loyalists to the extreme and were initiating the Inquisition, forced the issue of obedience. Either the Brothers would have to assume the same discipline as their monastic brother-Canons, or suffer the interdict and Inquisition. The Brothers on the whole were loyal to the Church, and under the circumstances the answer was an easy one. Under the pressure of the Reformation extremism, the compromise position was untenable. The Common Life submitted to the Monastic Discipline.

Their submission, however, may not have been so easy but





for their own increasing weakness. Almost two centuries had passed since that original small group of enthusiasts gathered about Master Gerard Groote and Florentius Radewin. The difficulties met by that small band soon forced them to accept the monastic alternative, even within the short lifetime of Gerard. Only those who had thoroughly imbibed of the founder's spirit and the enthusiasm of that original, harassed group of Brothers could maintain the difficult ideal of the Common Life. But alas, time had passed. The spirit of Master Gerard could no longer be felt even within the group of disciples who had known or even seen him. It had to be gleaned from written accounts already old, or heard from those who had heard the stories told. Too large had they grown as well. Rapidly and far they had spread. They were welcomed, invited, and supported wherever they went. Wealth and decay had followed in many instances. <sup>309</sup> The same phenomena had sadly occurred among the Franciscans, even within the lifetime of the founder of the Order and before his very eyes. Remoteness in time, separation by distance, growth in numbers, and the accumulation of wealth and acclaim seem to bring worldliness and loss of zeal to any monastic adventure. It was true of the Brothers as well. They were in no spiritual or moral condition to maintain their stand in the flooding movements of the Renaissance and Reformation.



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